

EXHIBIT T

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Hi Guys,

Sorry this is later than I expected-- the titles are KILLING me. Let me know what you think of the pages-- happy to change anything you want during the copyedit pass. But I think I addressed everything you had concerns about and also layered more into Jaxon's and Grace's relationship throughout every interaction they have. Let me know if you want more.

Thanks,
Tracy

Chapter Fifteen

One Person's Winter Wonderland is Another Person's Frozen Hellscape

"Did he just ...?" Macy gasps out after he shuts the door behind him.

"It's not a big deal," I assure her.

"Flint just ...?" Apparently the word is still failing her because she taps her cheek in the same spot Flint just kissed mine.

"It's *not* a big deal," I say again. "It's not like he planted one on me or anything. He was just being friendly."

~~"He's never been friendly like that to me. Or anyone else that I've seen."~~

"Yeah, well, you've got a boyfriend. He's probably afraid Cam will kick his ass."

Macy laughs. She actually laughs, which...okay. The idea of her thin, lanky boyfriend kicking Flint's ass does seem a little absurd. But still, shouldn't she at least pretend to defend him?

"You want me to talk to him? See if he'll kiss *you* next time?"

~~"Of course not! I'm very happy with Cam and his kisses, thank you. I'm just saying, Flint likes you." She grabs a brush, starts running it through her hair. Yeah, cuz that will happen.~~ She unwraps her hair, ~~starts brushing out the wet strands.~~

~~Despite her words,~~ there's something in her tone that has me narrowing my eyes. "Wait. Do you ~~want it to happen?~~"

~~She grabs some product, smooths it through her hair. "What do you mean?"~~

~~"You know exactly what I mean." I make my way over to her. "Do you have a crush on Flint?"~~

Commented [ep1]: We need to be really careful in this scene that she doesn't come across as jealous and catty. She HAS a boyfriend... This would all honestly work better if she wasn't dating Cam. Then it would be normal not catty jealousy. More like envy as she moons him from afar. But the fact that she has Cam, they were all over each other in a previous scene, and yet she's still begrudging her cousin from being with him just makes her bitchy.

Commented [ep2]: Doesn't seem like Flint was in the room long enough for her to have showered.

~~“Of course I don’t. No! Of course not!! I’m crazy about Cam.”~~ She avoids looking me in the eye ~~as she grabs some product and starts smoothing it through her hair.~~

“Yeah, because that’s real convincing.” I roll my eyes. “Look, i If you want to be with Flint, shouldn’t you just break up with Cam and go for it?”

“I *don’t* want to be with Flint.”

“Mace—” “

“I’m serious, Grace. Maybe I used to have a crush on him, way back in ninth grade or something. But that was a long time ago and it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Because of Cam.” I watch her face closely in the mirror as she starts to style blow-dry her short, colorful hair.

“Because I love Cam, yes,” she says ~~as she spikes up a few strands. s she yanks a brush through her hair a little too hard.~~ “And also because it’s not like that here.”

“Not like what?”

“The different groups. They don’t mix that much.”

“Yeah, I noticed that at the party last night. But just because they *don’t*, doesn’t mean they *can’t*, right? I mean, if you like Flint and he likes you—”

“I don’t like Flint!” she says loud enough to be heard ~~over the dryer ... and~~ three rooms down. “And he definitely doesn’t like me. And if I did like him, it wouldn’t matter anyway, because...”

“Because what? He’s popular?”

She sighs, shakes her head. “It’s more than that.”

“More than *what*? ~~What is this? [The Breakfast Club?]~~ I’m beginning to feel like I’ve fallen into Mean Girls, Alaska version or something.”

Commented [ep3]: You use this phrase later so need to change it here to something else.

A knock sounds on the door before she can answer.

“Exactly hHow many people stop by your room before seven-thirty in the morning anyway?” I joke as I cross to ~~the door~~~~answer the knock~~. Macy doesn’t answer, just kind of shakes her head and grins as she ~~starts on her make-up~~~~goes back to drying her hair~~.

I pull open the door to find my uncle ~~looking down~~~~staring~~ at me worriedly. “How are you feeling, Grace? Macy said you were throwing up last night.”

“I’m better, Uncle Finn. The nausea’s gone and so is the headache.”

“You’re sure?” He gestures for me to climb back into my bed, so I do—a little gratefully, if I’m being honest. I’ve gotten so little sleep the last two nights that I feel like I’m in a fog, even if the altitude sickness has finally gone away.

“Good.” He puts a hand on my forehead, like he’s testing if I have a fever.

I start to crack a joke about altitude sickness not being a virus, but as he follows ~~the hand~~ on my forehead with a kiss to the top of my head, I get choked up. Because right now, with his eyebrows furrowed and his mouth curled into a frown that only makes his dimples more apparent, Uncle Finn looks so much like my dad that it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to cry.

“I still think Macy’s right,” he continues, oblivious to how broken I suddenly feel. “You should spend the day resting and start class tomorrow. Losing your parents, the move, ~~Katsmere~~~~Katmeres~~ Academy, Alaska—it’s a lot to get used to, even without altitude sickness.”

I nod, but look ~~away~~ ~~before he can see the emotion in my eyes.~~

He must recognize my struggle, because he doesn’t say anything else. Just pats my hand before wandering back to the built-in vanity where Macy is still ~~getting ready~~ ~~drying her hair~~.

Commented [ep4]: She said earlier no one acknowledges her parents’ death and it bothers her. I think it’s fine just deleting this entirely.

~~They talk, but they keep their voices so low that I can't hear anything. If they talk, I can't hear it over the blow dryer,~~ so I just tune it all out. I ~~crawl back into bed,~~ pull my covers up to my chin, ~~roll over on my side.~~ And wait for the pain of missing my parents to pass.

I don't plan to fall asleep, but I do anyway. The next time I wake up it's after one and my stomach is ~~grumblingowling~~ pretty much nonstop. This time, though, the discomfort is because it's been more than twenty-four hours since I've put anything that even resembles food ~~into~~ it.

There's a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers on top of the fridge, and I avail myself of both of them. ~~Approximately four tablespoons~~ of peanut butter and an entire sleeve of crackers later and I finally feel human again.

I also feel trapped—inside this room and inside the school.

——— I try to ignore the restlessness, try to watch one of my favorite shows on Netflix or read the magazine I didn't finish on the plane. I even text Heather, though I know she's at school, hoping she can message back and forth with me for a while. Except—, according to the one text she does manage to send back—, she's about to take a calculus test, so definitely no distraction there.

Nothing else I try sticks either, so finally I decide to just go for it. Maybe a walk around the Alaskan wilderness is exactly what I need to clear my head.

But deciding to go for a walk and actually getting ready to go for one are two ~~very~~ different things up here. I take a quick shower and then—~~because I'm a total newbie—I~~ google how to dress for an Alaskan winter. Turns out the answer is ~~very~~ carefully, even when it's only November.

Once I pull up a site that looks reputable, the clothes Macy made sure I have make a lot more sense. I start with the wool tights she got for me and one of my tank tops, then add a layer

Commented [ep5]: ng

Commented [TD6R6]: ??

of long underwear—pants and shirt. After the underwear, I slip into fleece pants in hot pink (of course) and a fleece jacket in gray. The site gives me the option of another, heavier jacket to go over this one, but it's nowhere near as cold as it's going to get in a couple of months, so I decide to skip it and go straight for the hat, scarf, gloves and 2 pairs of socks. Finally, I finish with the down filled hooded parka my uncle got me and a pair of the snow boots rated for Denali that are at the bottom of my closet.

A quick look in the mirror tells me I look as ridiculous as I feel.

But I figure ~~I'll it'll~~ look even more ridiculous if I freeze to death on my first full day in Alaska, so I ignore the feeling. Besides, if I end up getting really warm during my walk, I can take the fleece layer off—or so the online guide suggests, as sweat is the enemy up here.

Apparently walking around in wet clothes can lead to hypothermia. So ... just like everything else in this state, a ... along with everything else up here.

Instead of texting her and interrupting one of her tests, I leave Macy a note telling her I'm going to go explore the school grounds—I'm not stupid enough to actually wander out past the wall into the wilderness, where there are wolves and bears and God only knows what else.

Then Once it's written and in plain sight, I head out. As I walk down the stairs, I ignore pretty much everyone I come across—which ~~isn't many people, honestly, is almost nobody~~ since ~~almost most of the school everyone else~~ is in class right now. I should probably feel guilty that I'm not, but to be honest, I just feel relieved.

Once I'm on the ground floor, I take the first outside door I can find, and then nearly ~~nearly~~ change my mind as the wind and cold all but slap me in the face.

—Maybe I should have put that extra layer on after all ...

It's too late now, so I pull my hoodie up over my head, and duck my scarf covered face down into my parka's high collar. Then I set out across the yard, despite the fact that every instinct I have is screaming at me to go back inside.

But I've always heard you're supposed to start something how you plan to end it, and I am *not* going to be a prisoner inside the school for the next ~~two years~~^{year}. Over my dead freaking body.

Commented [TD7]: I made her a senior last pass. Still okay, right?

Commented [TD8R8]:

I shove my hands in my pockets and begin to walk.

At first, I'm so miserable that all I can think about is the cold and how it feels against my skin, despite the fact that pretty much every inch of me is covered up in multiple layers.

But the more I walk, the warmer I become, so I up my pace and finally get the chance to start looking around. The sun rose about two hours ago—at nearly ten a.m.—so this is my first daylight look at the wilderness.

I'm struck by how beautiful everything is, even here on the campus grounds. We're on the side of a mountain, so everything is sloped, which means I'm constantly walking up or down one hill or another—which isn't easy considering the altitude, but at least I'm breathing a lot easier than I was two days ago.

There aren't a lot of different plants here right now, but there are a number of evergreens lining the different walkways and clustered at different points around campus. They're a beautiful green against the backdrop of white snow that covers nearly everything out there.

And that too is beautiful. I'd never seen snow before two nights ago and now that it's daylight and I can really get a good look at see it, I'm struck by how inviting it is~~the sight of it~~. Even though most of the snow here has a ton of footprints in it, it's still really gorgeous ~~to look at~~. Besides, I actually like the footprints. They give me something to follow.

Curious what it feels like—but not stupid enough to take my gloves off—I bend down and scoop up a handful of snow, then let it slip through my fingers just to see how it falls. When my hand is empty, I bend down and scoop up some more, then do what Flint said earlier and pat it into a ball.

It's easier than I thought it would be, and it only takes a few seconds before I'm hurling the snow as hard as I can at the nearest tree. I watch with satisfaction as it hits the trunk ~~branches~~ and explodes.

I make a few more snowballs, just for practice, as I continue walking around the grounds. Eventually the path I'm on splits off in three different directions and I start to go to the left simply because it's the path directly in front of me. But there's a giant birch tree blocking half the path right at the entrance.

I've never before seen anything like it's dark, twisted roots. Huge and gray and gnarled together in a chaotic mess that looks like something out of a really bad nightmare, they pretty much scream for passers-by to beware. Add in the broken branches and ripped up bark of the trunk and the thing looks like it belongs in the middle of a horror movie instead of Katmeres's ,s.-otherwise pristine campus.

I'm not going to lie. It gives me pause. I know it's ridiculous to be repulsed by a tree, but the closer I get to it, the worse it looks—and the worse I feel about the trail. Figuring I've already pushed my comfort zone enough for one day just being out here, I veer toward the sun-dappled path on the right instead.

Turns out, it's a good choice, because as soon as I make my way around the first bend, I can see a bunch of buildings. There are several buildings out here besides the castle, and I pause

to look at most of them from a safe distance ~~since c-~~ Class is in session ~~, after all,~~ and the last thing I want is to be caught trying to peek in through the windows like some kind of weirdo.

Besides, each cottage—and they do look like cottages—has a sign in front of it that names the ~~buildingeottage~~ and says what it's used for.

_____ I pause when I get to one of the larger cottages. It's labeled ~~Chinook: Tanana:~~ Art, and my heart speeds up a little just looking at it. I've been sketching and painting since I understood crayons can do more than color in coloring books—_____ and part of me wants nothing more than to run up the snow-lined path and throw open the door, just to see what kind of art studio they have out here that I can work in.

_____ ~~But classes are in session and I don't want to draw attention to myself. Besides, I'm sure I'll have a chance to see it when I start my own classes tomorrow.~~

~~But classes are in session, so~~ I settle for pulling out my phone and taking a quick pic of the sign. I'll google the word ~~tanana-chinook~~ later. ~~I know it means wind in at least one native Alaskan language, but it will be fun to figure out which one. , figure out what language it is and what it means.~~

I kind of want to know what *all* the words mean, so as I continue walking past the different outlying buildings—some larger than others—I snap a picture of each sign so I can look up the words later. Plus, I figure it'll help me remember where everything is, since I don't ~~have a clue what rooms my classes are in yet. know where my classes are yet.~~

I ~~am~~ actually a little concerned about having too many classes out here, because what am I supposed to do? Run back to my room and get all these clothes on between classes? If so,

exactly how long are their passing periods here at ~~Katsmere~~Katmeres? Because the six minutes I got at my old school isn't exactly going to cut it.

When I reach the end of the scattered row of buildings, I find a stone-lined trail ~~that~~ seems to wind its way around the grounds to the other side of the castle. A weird sense that I should turn around settles across my shoulders—kind of like what I felt at the library last night-- and I pause for a second.

But I know when I'm letting my imagination get the better of me-- that tree back there really spooked me--so I shake-off the feeling and head down the trail. I.

Turns out, the further I get from the main building, the worse the wind gets, and I pick up my pace to try to stay warm. So much for getting too hot and taking off a layer like that website ~~site~~ suggested. Pretty sure the threat of turning into a Grace-flavored popsicle gets a little more real with every second that passes.

Still, I don't turn back. At this point I'm pretty sure I've circled more than half the grounds, which means I'm closer to the main castle if I keep going forward instead of heading back the way I came. So, I pull my scarf a little more tightly around my face, shove my hands deep into my coat pockets and keep going. I'm closer to the main castle if I keep going than turn around so I wrap my arms around myself protectively, tuck my chin against the bitter wind, and keep going.

As I take the trail, I go by a few more clumps of trees, a pond that is completely frozen over that I would love to ice skate on if I can manage to balance with all these clothes on, and a couple more small buildings. One is labeled SHILA: SHOP and the other says TANANACHINOOK: DANCE STUDIO over the door.

Commented [ep9]: You should add in something else that is foreboding in the landscape without it seeming intentional. Like a large tree with spiny limbs looming over the courtyard yada yada. Slight pacing problem but if we layer in warnings to turn around subtly I think it'll help.

Commented [TD10R10]: Added a tree up above

Commented [ep11]: Why was she taking pictures of the signs earlier to look up the meanings if the meanings are right next to the words?

Commented [TD12R12]: It's the name of the cottage, The words don't mean art or dance studio

The ~~cottage names are cool, but the classes they house signs~~ surprise me a little. —I don't know what I expected of ~~KatsmereKatmeres~~ Academy, but I guess it wasn't that it would have everything a regular high school has and so much more.

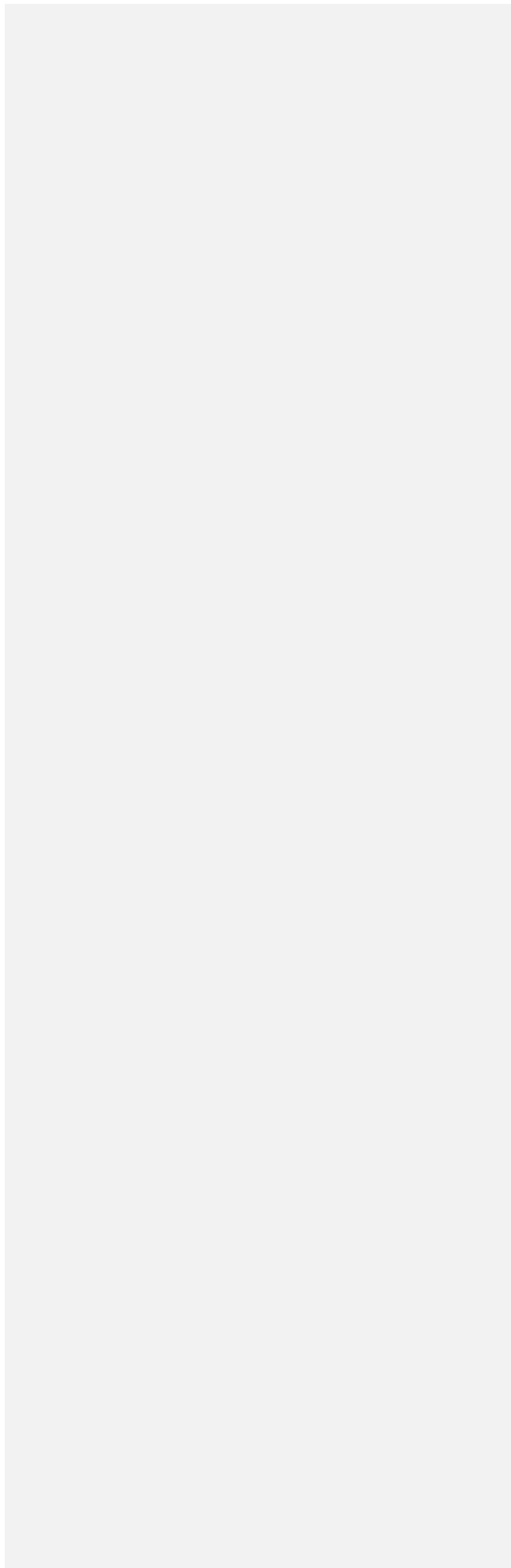
—Admittedly, my only knowledge of rich boarding schools comes from my mom's old DVD of Dead Poet's Society that she made me watch with her once a year. ~~But i~~n that movie, Weldon Academy was super strict, super harsh, and super stuck-up. So far, ~~KatsmereKatmeres~~ Academy only seems to be one of the three.

The wind is getting worse, so once again I pick up my pace, following the trail past a bunch of larger trees ~~only~~. ~~These aren't evergreens, their leaves long gone and their branches coated in frost and dripping with icicles. I pause to study a few of them because they're beautiful, and because the light refracting through them sends rainbows dancing on the ground at me feet.~~

— I'm charmed by this little bit of whimsy, so much that I don't even mind the wind for a second because it's what's making the rainbows dance. Eventually, though, I get too cold to stand still and I make my way out of the trees to find another frozen pond. This one is obviously meant for social gatherings because there are several seats around it, along with a snow topped gazebo several yards away.

I take a couple steps toward the gazebo, thinking I might sit down ~~and rest~~ for a minute, before I realize that it's already occupied. ~~by~~ by Lia ~~and~~ and Jaxon.

|



Chapter Sixteen

Sometimes Keeping Your Enemies Close is the Only Thing that Prevents HypothermiaDamn it.

I swore to myself that I wasn't going to go running like a scared rabbit the next time I saw Jaxon, but this doesn't exactly seem like the time to hang around. Not when everything about their conversation screams intense. And —more importantly-- private.

The way his and Lia's bodies are angled toward each other but aren't actually touching.

The re-rigidness of their shoulders.

How~~The way~~ they're both completely wrapped up in arguing over whatever the other one is saying.

There's a part of me that wishes I was closer, that wishes I could hear what they're talking about even though it is *absolutely none of my business*. Still, But any people who look as grim and angry as ~~look the way~~ these two do, obviously have some kind of problem and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to know what it is.

Commented [ep13]: Can you describe this better?

I don't know why it matters so much to me, except there's an intimacy to their fighting that makes my stomach hurt just a little. Which is absurd~~ridiculous~~ considering I barely know Jaxon. And considering that two ~~because~~ of the four times we've run into each other, ~~two of these~~ he's blown past me like I don't even exist.

That in and of itself is a pretty big hint that he wants nothing to do with me.

Except I keep remembering the look on his face when he chased those guys away from me the first night. The way his ~~pupils were all blown out eyes went all dark, their pupils blown out~~, when he touched my face and wiped the drop of blood from my lips.

_____The way his body brushed against mine and it felt like everything inside of me was holding its breath, just waiting for a chance to come alive.

We didn't feel like strangers then.

Which is probably why I keep watching ~~him and Liathem~~, against my better judgment.

They're arguing fiercely now, so much so that I can hear their raised voices, even as far away as I am. I'm not close enough to actually make out the words, but I don't need to know what they're saying to know just how furious they both are.

And that's before Lia lashes out at him, her open palm cracking against his scarred cheek hard enough to have Jaxon's head flying back. He doesn't hit her ~~in returnback~~. In fact, he doesn't do anything at all until her palm comes flying at his face again.

This time, he catches her wrist in his hand and holds tight as she struggles to pull away. She's screaming full-out now, harsh sounds of rage and agony that claw their way inside of me and bring tears to my eyes.

I know those sounds. I know the agony that causes them and the rage that makes it impossible to contain them. I know how they come from deep inside, and how they leave your throat—and your soul—shredded in their wake.

Instinctively, I take a step toward her—toward them—galvanized by Lia's pain and the barely leashed violence that hangs in the air between them. But the wind picks up as I take that first step and suddenly they're both turning and staring at me with flat, black eyes that send a

chill straight through me. A chill that has nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Jaxon and Lia and the way they're looking at me.

_____ Like they're the predators and I'm the prey they can't wait to sink their teeth into.

~~It's a ridiculous thought to have, I tell myself that I'm just spooked, but it doesn't help me shake the weird feeling, but it's one I can't quite shake,~~ even as I give them both ~~of them~~ a little wave. I thought Lia and I might be becoming friends yesterday—especially when she suggested doing mani/pedis together—~~but it's obvious that friendship doesn't extend to whatever is~~ happening here. Which is fine. The last thing I want to do is get in the middle of a fight between two people who obviously have some kind of history together. But I also don't want to leave them alone together if their fight has deteriorated to her hitting him and him grabbing her in self-defense.

All of which leaves me unsure of what I'm supposed to do now, stuck where I am, an awkward guard staring at both of them in an effort to prevent I don't know what while they stare right back at me.

~~But w~~When Jaxon drops Lia's wrist and takes a couple steps toward me, the same panic that hit me yesterday at the party slams through me again. As does the same odd fascination I've had from the beginning. I don't know what it is about him, but every time I catch sight of him, I feel something I can't identify, something I have no ability to explain.

He advances a few more steps and my heart kicks up another notch, or fifty. Still, I stand my ground—I ran from Jaxon once. I'm not going to do it a second time.

But then Lia reaches out, ~~is the one~~ grabbing *him*, holding *him* back, pulling *him* toward her. The dangerous look fades from her eyes (though not from his) until it's almost like it was never there, and she waves at me enthusiastically.

Commented [ep14]: Dragging Lia? He needs to drop her wrist first.

“Hi, Grace! Come join us.”

Ummm, ~~no thanks. Not~~ in a million years. Not when every instinct I have is screaming at me to flee even though I don’t know why. So instead of moving forward, I give her another little wave and call, “Actually, I’ve got to get back to my room before Macy sends out another search party. I just wanted to explore a little bit before I start classes tomorrow. Have a good afternoon fun!”

The last seems like major overkill considering the fury I sensed between them, but I tend to either clam up or babble when I’m nervous, so all in all, it’s not a *terrible* performance. Or at least that’s what I tell myself as I turn and start walking away as fast as I can without actually running, without looking like I’m actually rushing.

Every step is a lesson in self-control as I have to force myself not to look back over my shoulder to see if Jaxon is still watching me. Have to force myself not to check if he is still watching me. The prickle at the back of my neck says he is, but I ignore it.

Just like I ignore the weird feeling inside of me that has shown up every time I’ve seen him. I assure myself it’s nothing, that it doesn’t matter. Because no way am I stupid enough to get a crush on a boy this complicated.

Still, the urge to turn around stays with me—right up until Jaxon appears by my side, eyes gleaming with interest and sexy af hair blowing in the wind.

“What’s the rush?” he asks, scooting in front of me so that he’s directly in my path, walking backward so we’re face to face, -and I’m forced to slow down or bump into him.

“Nothing.” I look down so I don’t have to look him in the eye. “I’m cold.”

“So, which is it? Nothing?” He stops walking, which forces me to do the same, then puts a finger under my chin and presses up until I give in and meet his eyes. ~~Then he~~ He gives me a

crooked little smile that does ~~unspeakable~~ridiculous things to my heart—the whole reason I’~~dd~~ been trying not to look at him to begin with. Especially considering what I just saw between him and Lia. “Or the cold?”

If I look closely, I can still see the imprint of her hand on his pale, scarred cheek. It pisses me off, more than it should considering I barely know the guy. Which is why I take a deliberate step to the side and say, “The cold. So if you’ll excuse me ...”

“You’re wearing an awful lot of clothes,” he tells me--confirming that I look as ridiculous as I feel—as he moves until Are you really cold in all that gear?” he asks, moving until he’s once again in front of me. “Or is it You sure the cold’s not just an excuse?”

“I don’t need to make excuses to you.” And yet I am, making excuses and trying to run away from him and what I just saw. Trying to run away from all the things he makes me feel when all I really want to do is grab onto him and hold on tight. It’s an absurd thought, an absurd feeling, but that doesn’t make it any less real.

He tilts his head, quirks a brow, and somehow has my heart beating that much faster because of it. “Don’t you?”

This is the part where I should start walking. The part where I should do a lot of things, anything, that doesn’t involve throwing myself at Jaxon Vega like I’m the game-deciding pitch at the World Series. But I don’t do that.

Instead, I stay where I am. Not because Jaxon is blocking my way—which he is—but becausebut because everything inside of me is responding to everything inside of him. Even the danger. Especially the danger, though I’ve never been that girl before, the one who takes risks just to see howthey they feel.

Maybe that's why—instead of moving around him and running back to the castle like I should—I look him straight in the eye and say, ask, “No. I don't answer to you.”

He laughs. He actually laughs, and it's the most arrogant thing I've ever heard. “Everyone answers to me ... eventually.”

Oh. My. God. What an *asshat*.

I roll my eyes and step around him, moving up the path with a stiff back and a fast pace that all but screams for him not to follow. Because when he says stuff like that, it doesn't matter how drawn to him I feel. I've got better things to do than to waste my time on a guy who thinks he's God's gift to everyone.

Except Jaxon must not be as adept at reading body language as I thought—or he just doesn't care. Either way, he doesn't let me go like I expect. Instead, he starts walking right alongside me, keeping pace no matter how hard and fast I push myself.

It's annoying af, even without the obnoxious smirk he doesn't try to hide. Or the multiple sidelong glances that precede the words, “Hanging out with Flint Montgomery isn't exactly keeping your head down.”

I ignore him, do my best Dory impression. Just keep walking, just keep walking.

“I'm just saying,” he continues when I don't respond. “Making friends with a dra—.” He breaks off, clears his throat before trying again. “Making friends with a guy like Flint is ...”

“What?” I turn on him, fury racing through me. “Being friends with Flint is *what* exactly?” I swear to God, if he's some kind of closet racist I'm going to scream. Then I'm never going to talk to him again, because *gross*. People are people and anyone who thinks otherwise isn't worth wasting my time—or anything else—on.

“Like painting a target on your back,” he answers, looking a little taken aback by my anger. “It’s pretty much the opposite of keeping a low profile.”

His words are so much like Macy’s that my anger recedes a little bit. Not a racist then. Just a classist ... which isn’t much better. “Oh, really? So what exactly is hanging out with *you* then?”

His face goes blank and I don’t think he’s going to answer. But eventually, he says, “Utter and complete stupidity.”

Not the answer I was expecting, especially from someone as arrogant and annoying as he can be. The blunt honesty of them slips past my defenses, though. Has me answering when I didn’t think there was anything else to say. “Yet here you are.”

“Yeah.” His dark, bemused eyes search my face. “Here I am.”

Silence echoes between us—dark, loaded, unfathomable—even as tension stretches taut as a circus high wire.

I should go.

He should go.

Neither of us moves. I’m not sure I even breathe.

Finally, Jaxon breaks the stillness—though not the tension—by taking a step closer to me. Then another and another, until the only thing that separates us is the bulky weight of my coat and the thinnest sliver of air.

Chills that have nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with Jaxon’s proximity dance up and down my spine.

My heart pounds.

My head swims.

My mouth goes desert dry.

And the rest of me doesn't fare much better ... especially when Jaxon reaches for my gloved hand, rubs his thumb back and forth across my palm.

"What were you and Flint talking about?" he asks after a second. "At the party?"

I'm not expecting the question and I blurt out an answer without thinking better of it. "I honestly don't remember."

It's the truth. With Jaxon touching me, I'm lucky to remember my own name.

He doesn't challenge my words. But the corners of his lips tip up in a very self-satisfied smile as he murmurs, "Good."

His smirk jumpstarts my brain—finally—and then it's my turn to ask a question

.

"What were you and Lia fighting about?"

I don't know what I expect—his gaze to go flat again, probably, or for him to tell me that it's none of my business. Instead, he says, "My brother," in a tone that doesn't ask for sympathy, and warns that he won't permit it.

It's not the answer I was expecting, but as the very few pieces I have start fitting themselves together in my head, my heart plummets. "Was...was Hudson your brother?"

For the first time, I see genuine surprise in his eyes. "Who told you about Hudson?"

"Lia did. Last night when we were having tea. She mentioned that—" " I break off at the glacial coldness ~~fury~~ in his eyes.

"What did she tell you?" The words are quiet, but that only makes them hit harder. As does the way he drops my hand. h he grinds out, and for the first time I feel a flash of fear.

Commented [ep15]: Let's remove the fear. Not sexy. Also, he's not suppose dto feel emotions. HE's supposed to be cold. So maybe he can ask with such ice in his tone she shivers?

~~— I swallow, then finish in a rush.~~ “Just that her boyfriend died.” ~~I finish in a rush.~~ “She didn’t say anything about you at all. I just took a guess that her boyfriend might also be...”

“My brother? Yeah, Hudson was my brother.” ~~He takes a step back.~~ ~~“Don’t bother telling me how sorry you are.”~~ The words drip ice, in an effort—I think—to keep me from knowing how much they hurt. But I’ve been there, have spent weeks doing the same thing and he doesn’t fool me.

~~“About that ... I’ve been thinking, maybe you’re right.”~~

~~— That startles a laugh out of him. Along with an appraising look that sends a whole different kind of shivers down my spine.~~ “About what?”

~~— “You know exactly what I’m talking about. And you’re right. When it comes to death and other important things, sorry’s a pretty useless word.”~~

~~— “Oh really?” Normally the smug words would get my back up, but I figure he’s got the right to gloat a little about this one. Even if he was a total jackass the last time we talked about it.~~

~~— “Yeah. Most of the time it doesn’t mean what it’s supposed to. It means, *I didn’t hear you or God, I’m such a loser or God, you’re a loser or that really sucks.* The truth is, most of the time the person saying it is anything *but* sorry. So what’s the point in repeating it at a time like this? It’s way too pathetic a word to even touch the kind of grief you’re feeling.”~~

~~— “I’m sorry,” I tell him, and this time I’m the one who reaches for him. The one whose fingers whisper over his wrist and the back of his hand. “I know it doesn’t mean anything, that it doesn’t touch the kind of grief you’re feeling. But I truly am sorry you’re hurting.”~~

For long seconds, he doesn’t say anything. Just ~~tilts his head and~~ watches me with those dark eyes that see so much and show so little. Finally, when I’m searching my brain for

something else to say. ~~way to take back what I just said~~, he asks, “What makes you think I’m ~~hurtinggrieving?~~”

“Aren’t you?” I challenge.

More silence. Then, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t...eans“ I shake my head. “I don’t know what does that ~~means,even mean?~~”

He shakes his head, ~~then moves back several feet. My hand clenches, missing the feel of him under my fingers. takes another step back, then another and another.~~

“I have to go.”

“Wait.” ~~I know better, but I reach for him again. I can’t help it.~~ “Just like that?”

He ~~doesn’t answer. Justlets me hold his hand for one second, two. Then he~~ turns and walks away so fast it’s nearly a run.

I don’t even bother trying to keep up. If I’ve learned anything in the last couple of days, it’s that ~~when Jaxon Vega wants to disappear, he disappears and there’s nothing I can do about there’s no catching Jaxon Montgomery if he doesn’t want to be caught.~~ Instead, I turn in the other direction and head back to the castle.

Now that I have a set destination in mind, the walk seems much faster than my original wandering did. But even though it goes quickly, I can’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that I’m being watched. Which is absurd, considering Jaxon went in the other direction and Lia disappeared right after her argument with Jaxon.

Still, the feeling stays with me the whole time I’m outside. Something else is niggling at me too, something I can’t quite figure out. At least not until I reach the warmth and safety of the castle—and my room. It’s as I’m peeling off all the layers I’m wearing that it finally hits me.

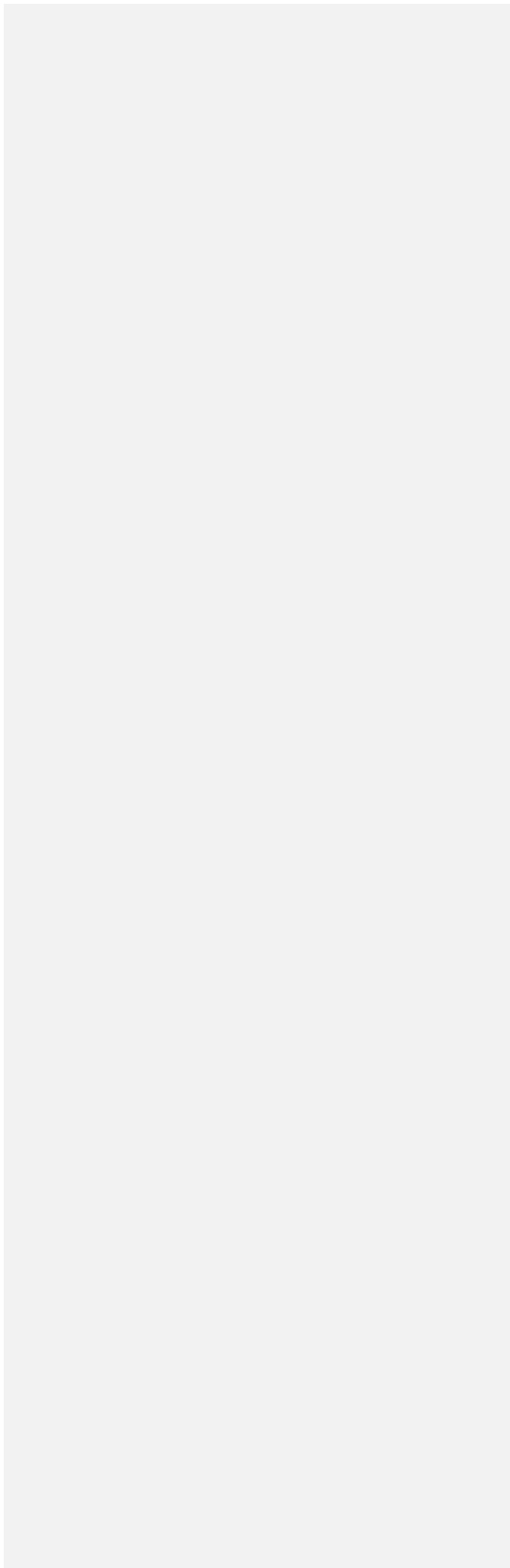
Neither Lia nor Jaxon were wearing a ~~jacket.~~

Commented [ep16]: Love this. I think this is what’s missing from the meet-cute.

Commented [ep17]: When did she learn this?

Commented [SA18]: Great!!

|



Chapter Seventeen

Sometimes it's Discretion, not Diamonds, That's A Girl's Best Friend

"You sure you're up for this?" Macy asks several hours later as I grab a sweatshirt from my closet.

Is she kidding? "Not even a little bit."

"That's what I figured." She heaves a huge sigh. "We could cancel if you want. Tell everyone you're still not over the altitude sickness."

"And have Flint think I'm chicken? No, thank you." I actually couldn't care less if Flint thinks I'm afraid or not. But Macy has been so excited about this snowball fight all day that there's no way I'm going to take it away from her. The fact that she offered to cancel because she knows I'm not into it, only makes me more determined to go. "We're going to this snowball fight and we're going to..."

"Kick some butt?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of not making complete and total fools out of ourselves, but way to think positive."

She laughs, as I intend her to, then bounds off the bed and starts layering up like crazy. Which...-finally, someone at this ridiculous school who has some sense. Between the jerks I met the first night and then Jaxon and Lia, I'm beginning to think everyone in this place has some bizarre immunity to cold. Like maybe they're aliens and I'm the stupid-ignorant and fragile human living among them.

After we both finish getting dressed in—I counted this time—six layers, she herds me toward the door. “Come on, we don’t want to be late or we’ll totally get ambushed.”

“Ambushed. With snowballs. Sounds fantastic.” San Diego has never looked so good.

“Just wait. You’re going to love it. Plus, it’ll give you a chance to meet all of Flint’s friends.” She checks her make-up one more time in the mirror by the door, then all but shoves me into the hallway.

“*All* of Flint’s friends?” I ask as we make our way through the halls. “Exactly how many people are going to be at this thing?”

“I don’t know. At least a fifty.”

“Fifty people? At a snowball fight?”

“Maybe more. Probably more.”

“How does that even work?” I demand.

“Does it matter?” she answers, brows raised.

“Yes, it matters. I mean, how can you possibly keep track of that many people trying to throw things at you?”

“I don’t think you keep track of them so much as try to flatten everyone you come across without being flattened yourself.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe the altitude sickness is coming back.”

“Too late.” She links her arm through mine and ~~starts tugging me along~~grins. “We’re almost there.”

“So, can you be a little more specific about who all is going to be there? Anyone I’ve already met—I mean, besides Flint?”

“I don’t know if Lia’s going to be there. Cam won’t—he and Flint don’t really get along. It’s a...-thing.”

I think about asking exactly what kind of thing she’s referring to, but truth is, I don’t care if Lia shows up. Or Cam. There’s only one person I’m trying to find out about and since Macy isn’t getting there herself, I guess I really am going to have to ask.

“How about Jaxon?” I keep my voice light even though-- ~~after our encounter earlier--~~ my heart is pounding at the mere mention of his name. “Is he going to be there?”

~~“Jaxon-who?” she asks, absently waving at a couple of people as we pass one of the open study rooms. Because apparently my cousin is a moron.~~

~~“There’s more than one?”~~

~~“Sure. Four or five, I think. Who are you talking about?”~~

~~The only one who matters, I’m guessing. “Jaxon Vega.”~~

“Jaxon Vega?” ~~B~~Sure enough, by the time she gets to the second syllable of Jaxon’s name, her voice is little more than a squeak.

“He is the one we saw in the hall that first day, right?”

“Yeah. Umm...-yeah.” Macy gives up any pretense of chill—and of walking, as it turns out. Instead, she turns to me, hands on her hips, and demands, “Why are you asking about Jaxon?”

“I don’t know. We ve met a couple of times, and I just wondered if he was into snowball fights.”

“You’ve met Jaxon Vega a couple of times? How exactly did you meet, considering I’ve been with you almost all of the time since you got here?”

“I don’t know, just walking around the school. It’s only a few times.”

“A few times?” Her eyes almost bug out of her head. “That’s more than a couple. Where? When? *How?*”

“Why are you being so weird about this?” I’m seriously beginning to regret bringing Jaxon up. I mean, she was freaked out over Flint, but it was a fun kind of freaked out. Right now, it looks more like she’s going to blow a gasket. “He was in the hallway, I was in the hallway. It just kind of happened.”

“Things don’t just happen with Jaxon. He’s not exactly known for being talkative with anyone outside of—” “She stops abruptly.

“Outside of whom?” I prompt.

“I don’t know. Just...”

“Just?”

She smiles a little sickly but doesn’t say anything else and it pisses me off. Like seriously, pisses me off. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“You start sentences and then never finish them. Or you start to say something and halfway through change what you were saying to something else entirely?”

“I don’t—” “

“You do. All the time. And, honestly, it’s beginning to feel a little weird. Like there’s some kind of secret I’m not supposed to know. What’s going on?”

“That’s ridiculous, Grace.” She looks at me like I’m a few snowballs short of an arsenal. ~~crazy~~: “KatsmereKatmeres is just, you know, full of all kinds of weird cliques and social rules. I didn’t want to bore you with them all.”

Commented [ep19]: Grace is constantly thinking everyone looks crazy. Or stupid. I’d really love to change more of these thoughts and reactions to things more interesting. More interesting facial expressions. She raises her eyebrows innocently but her gaze doesn’t quite meet mine. Yeah, something is definitely off here. Yada yada And man, if you threw in a simile every once in a while I would squee with supreme joy

Commented [TD20R20]: I’ve thrown in several in the preceding chapters ;)

“Because you’d rather I commit social suicide?” I arch my brows at her.

She rolls her eyes. “Social suicide is the last thing you need to worry about here.”

It’s the first real thing she’s said since we started this conversation, and I jump on it. “So what do I have to worry about then?”

Macy sighs, low and long and just a little sad. But then she looks me in the eye and says, “All “I was going to say is that Jaxon’she’s not very friendly with people who aren’t in the Order.”

Macy looks me straight in the eyes, finally, and puts her hands on her hips. “Of course not! You know I want you to be happy here.”

“Then prove it. What were you going to say about Jaxon before you cut yourself off?”

She doesn’t answer for long seconds. Finally, when I’m about to ask again, she says sighs. “I was going to say he’s not very friendly with people who aren’t in the Order.”

“The Order? What’s that?”

“It’s nothing, really.” When I keep looking at her, silently pushing her to continue, she sighs again then adds, “It’s just a nickname we gave the most popular boysguys at school because they’re always together.”

I think about the guys Jaxon ~~he~~ walked into the party with, and the ones who were with him in the hall when Flint was carrying me to my room. At the time, I remember thinking that Jaxon looked like the leader, but I didn’t think much of it. I was too busy trying not to stare at him.

Commented [ep21]: Awkwardly written but you get my drift. Lol I can’t tell if she’s wringing her hands, fearful she’s offended grace, or insisting she’s only doing things to help her, etc.

Based on my recollections, Macy's explanation is reasonable. Still there's something about the way she says it—and the way she's looking everywhere but in my eyes ~~again~~—that makes me think there's more to the story than she's letting on.

Still, standing in the middle of the hallway doesn't seem the best place to keep pushing at her—especially since we really are going to be late if we don't get moving.

With that in mind, I start walking and Macy does too, but she sticks close to my side. I give her a weird look, wondering what² she's up to, at least until she asks in a kind of stage whisper, "Have you met the others, too?"

"The other members of the Order?" I feel a little ridiculous just saying the name out loud. I mean, they're twelfth grade students at a boarding school, ~~not running a monastery in Tibet~~. "No. I've only met Jaxon."

Commented [ep22]: lololol

"Only?— You mean he was *alone*?" Now she doesn't just look worried, ~~s~~he looks downright sick.

"Yeah. So?"

"Oh God! What did he do? Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Jaxon?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Of course, Jaxon! That *is* who we're talking about, right?"

"No, he didn't *hurt* me. Why would you even think he would?"

She throws her hands in the air, frustration and fear evident in every line of her body.

"Because he's Jaxon. ~~That's what he does~~ He's a one-man demolition crew. It's what he does!"

“He was...” I shake my head, try to think of the right word to describe our interactions. Then go with generic because I figure Macy won’t get it anyway. “Most of the time he was actually kind of ~~... nice~~.”

S-S: “Nice?” he looks at me like I just said I wanted to body surf the Alaskan tundra.

“Okay, I’m confused. Are you sure we’re talking about the same Jaxon?” She pulls me into the nearest alcove, then grabs my hands and squeezes them tightly. “Really tall, really gorgeous, *really scary?* B, black hair, black eyes, black clothes, and a smoking hot body? Plus the arrogance of a rock star ... or the self-proclaimed dictator of a not so small country and a smoking hot body?”

I’ve got to admit, it’s a pretty good description—especially the arrogant part. And the really gorgeous part, even if it doesn’t take into account a lot of the things that make him so attractive. Like his jaw and his lips and that insanely hot voice. Not to mention the thin scar that turns him from merely pretty to sexy af. And also scary af.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“You know you don’t have to lie, right? You can tell me what happened. I swear I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to.”

“You won’t tell anyone what?” I’m thoroughly confused now. Because while it might have been a stretch to call Jaxon nice, I can’t imagine why it’s the fact that I’ve met him is eliciting this kind of response from my cousin.

Commented [TD23]:

Commented [ep24]: For the life of me, I can’t make this indent right.

Commented [TD25R25]: I got it ☺

Commented [ep26]: lol

Commented [ep27]: Didn’t she just describe everyone in the Order though?

Commented [ep28R28]:

Commented [TD29R28]: I think I fixed it. Is that enough?

“What he did to you?” She starts looking me over, like she’s searching for some proof that ~~Jaxon attacked me or something. I survived a rabid Jaxon attack.~~

“He didn’t *do* anything, Macy.” A little impatient now, I pull my hands from hers. “I mean, he wasn’t Gandhi. But he helped me out when I needed it, and he sure as hell didn’t hurt me. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Because Jaxon Vega isn’t nice to anyone. Or helpful. Ever.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Well, you should.” ~~sShe looks at me like I’m stupid says slowly, enunciates each word in an obvious attempt to make sure I listen to—and understand—what she’s saying. as though she wants to be sure I’m ingesting every word.~~ “Because he’s dangerous, Grace. *Very* dangerous, and you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can.”

I start to tell her that he’s not the dangerous one, but then I remember the way Marc and Quinn fell right into line the second he showed up. It was hard to miss the fear on their faces, and not just because he’d sent them flying across the room.

Now that I think back on it, they ~~had~~ been scared of him. Like really scared, and not just because he’d called them out for hassling me.

“I’m serious. You need to be careful of him. If he really was nice to you, it’s only because he wants something. And even that seems strange, because Jaxon takes what he wants. Always has, always will.”

I’ve been here three days and even I know that’s not true. Which is probably why I say, “Jaxon’s the one who kept Marc and Quinn from throwing me out in the snow, Macy. I don’t think he did it because he wanted something from me.”

“Wait. *He’s* the one?”

“Yes, he is. Why would he do that if he’s such a bad guy?”

“I don’t know.” She looks stunned. “But just because he helped you once doesn’t mean he’ll do it again. So be careful with him, okay?”

“He’s not the one who tried to kill me.”

She snorts. “Yeah, well, you’ve only been here a few days. Give it time.”

“That’s ...” For long seconds, I trip over my tongue as I try to find a comeback that will show her how absurd she sounds. But in the end, I can’t get past the annoyance her words cause and end up saying exactly what I’m thinking. “A really awful thing to say.”

“Just because it’s awful doesn’t make it any less true.” She gives me a no-nonsense look that seems incongruous with her normally effervescent personality. “You need to trust me on this.”

“Macy-...”

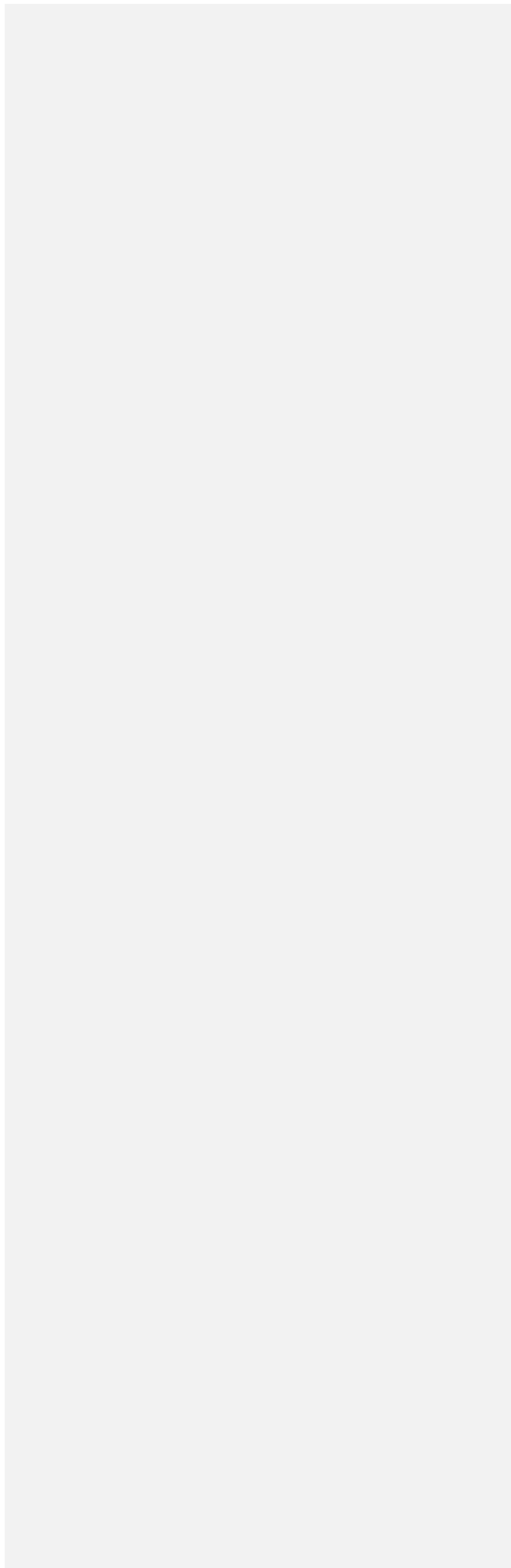
“I’m serious. Don’t worry about me being too harsh.” She narrows her eyes at me in obvious warning. “And don’t worry about Jaxon Vega. Unless you’re trying to figure out how to stay as far away from him as possible.”

Behind her, something catches my eye and my mouth goes dry. “Yeah, well, that might be a problem.” I barely manage to get the words out past my suddenly tight throat.

“And why is that exactly?”

“Because I’m not going anywhere.” Jaxon’s low, amused voice cuts through my cousin’s umbrage, has her eyes going wide and her skin turning pale. “And neither is Grace.”

|



Chapter Eighteen

How Many Hot Guys Does it Take To Win a Snowball Fight?

Macy squeaks—she actually squeaks—but Jaxon just raises his brows at me. The look on his face is wicked, wild, and my heart grins at me, a wicked, wild thing that has my breath catching and my heart starts beating like a metronome on high.

At least until Macy pinches my hand and hisses, “Seriously? You couldn’t tell me he was there?”

“I didn’t—” “

“She didn’t know.” He looks me over from top to bottom and for a second—just a second—a smile his smile touches reaches the depths of those obsidian eyes of his. “Braving the snow twice in one day? I’ve got to admit I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be too impressed. I still have to make it through the snowball fight in one piece.”

The smile drops—from his face and his eyes—as quickly as it came. “You’re playing Flint’s game?”

It sounds more like an accusation than a question, though I don’t know why. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“For a *snowball* fight?” He shakes his head, makes a dismissive sound deep in his throat.

“I don’t think so.” He shakes his head. “Not so much.”

“Oh, well...” That got awkward fast. “Umm. We should probably ...” “

“Get going,” Macy finishes, tugging on my arm. “We don’t want to be late.”

Commented [ep30]: Need to get in this section that he says he’s here to check up on her> I thought I’d warned you to stay in your room. You’ll have to be delicate in how he’s bossy so it doesn’t come across that he’s abusively controlling. That she can see in his eyes he’s sincere, he doesn’t think this place is safe. Ohh go back to the werewolf scene where I said him accusing her that it’s her fault she was in jeopardy was wrong, if ou change the meetcute to be a warning, that’ll make more sense there and then THIS warning will also make sense, she DID almost die, etc.

Jaxon ignores her as he braces a hand on the wall behind me. Then he leans in and—in a voice so low I have to strain to hear him—murmurs, “You’re determined not to listen to me, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I whisper back, but I can’t look him in the face as I say it. Not when I’m lying—I know exactly what he’s talking about—and not when his breath is so warm and soft against my ear that I can feel it everywhere, even deep inside.

“It really is for your own good,” he tells me, and he’s still standing way too close. Heat slams through me—at his words and his proximity and the bergamot and dark water scent of him currently wrapping itself around me.

“What—” My voice breaks, my throat so tight and dry I can barely force the words through it when I try again. “What is?”

“You shouldn’t go to that snowball fight with Flint.” He pulls back, his gaze catching—and holding mine. “And you sure as hell shouldn’t be wandering around the school grounds on your own. You’re not *safe* here.”

It’s the second time he’s implied that Katmeres is dangerous for me. And I get it. I do. Alaska is no picnic for the uninitiated. But I’m with *Macy*, on school grounds. No way is she going to let anything happen to me.

“I’ll be fine.” It’s easier to breathe now that Jaxon’s mouth isn’t a scant inch from my ear, but finding words is still harder than it should be under his watchful gaze. “I’m not planning on wandering off tonight. I’ll be with the group the whole time.”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t sound impressed. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

“What do you mean?” I demand. “I thought you’d be relieved I’m not planning on tackling any wild animals with my bare hands.”

“It’s not the *wild* animals I’m concerned about.”

Before I can ask him what that means, Macy interjects again. “We should get going. “We don’t want to be late.”

“We don’t want to be late.” Well, whatever you’re concerned about, you shouldn’t be.”
“You could join us,” I tell him, refusing to be pulled away before I’m ready. “I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. But if you want, you can join us.”

“Join you.” His tone implies I just suggested that we fly to Mars under our own power.

But I refuse to be dissuaded. Not when Jaxon is standing so close to me instead of pulling his usual disappearing act. “It’ll be fun. And I’m sure Flint won’t mind.”

“You’re sure he won’t mind.” He repeats my words again, and again it isn’t a question.
He’s back to looking amused, though—at least if you don’t look ~~Once again, it’s not a question,~~
though Jaxon is back to looking amused, as long as you don’t look too closely at his eyes.

They’re flat now, completely empty in a way I haven’t seen since he looked through me at the party. “Because I’ve got to tell you say, I’m pretty sure he will.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Why would he? He invited a ton of people.” I turn to look at Macy, who has gone from pale to absolutely sheet white.

I roll my eyes at her, annoyed she seems so freaked out at the idea of hanging with Jaxon,
but before I can say anything ~~And that’s before~~ Flint walks up behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. “Hey, Grace. Looks like you’re ready to get your snowball on.”

“I am, actually.” I turn and end up grinning at him because it’s impossible not to. He’s just that fun *and* that charming. Not to mention the fact that he’s wearing a snow hat in the shape of a fire breathing dragon that looks absolutely ridiculous. “In fact, I was trying to talk Jaxon into joining us.”

“Oh ~~r~~Really?” Flint’s eyes go ~~a kind of electric green~~~~indigo blue~~ as he looks from me to Jaxon. “What do you say, Vega? Want to fight?”

He’s smiling, but even I can tell it’s not a friendly invitation—...and that’s before three other guys join us, arranging themselves in a semi-circle right behind Jaxon. For the first time, the phrase “got your back” makes sense to me, because it’s very obvious that’s why these guys are here. To have Jaxon’s back. I just don’t know from what.

These must be members of the infamous Order Macy was telling me about. And I can see why they got the nickname—there’s a closeness between the four of these guys that even I can’t miss. A bond that seems to be about a lot more than simple friendship.

Flint feels it, too. I can tell by the way he stiffens, and the way he shifts his weight forward, onto his toes, like he’s just waiting for Jaxon to throw the first punch. More, like he’s hoping for it.

Which—...no. Just, no. I don’t care if there’s suddenly enough testosterone in our little alcove to start the next world war, it’s not going to happen. At least not while Macy and I are standing directly in the middle.

“Come on.” I grab my cousin’s arm. “Let’s go figure out a way to win this snowball fight.”

That gets both Jaxon’s and Flint’s attention. “Those are big words coming from someone who never saw snow before she got here three days ago,” Flint teases, and while the tension isn’t gone, it’s way lower than it was a few seconds ago—exactly as I intended.

“Yeah, well, you know me. All about the bravado.” I keep a firm grip on Macy’s arm as I start to maneuver around Jaxon and his friends.

“Is that what you call it?”~~“Don’t you mean, all about the ...”~~ Jaxon murmurs in my ear as

I slide past him. Once more, h~~His warm breath breath is hot~~w against my ear, the side of my neck, and a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold works its way down my spine.

Our eyes meet and for a second, just a second, the whole world seems to drop away. Macy, Flint, the other students who are laughing and chattering as they move past us on their way to the door all disappear until it’s just Jaxon and me and the electricity that arcs between us.

My breath catches in my throat, my whole body grows warm and it takes real, physical effort to stop myself from reaching out and touching him.

I think he must be having the same problem, because his hand comes up, hovers in the air between us for one long, infinite moment.

“Grace.” It’s barely a whisper, but still I feel it all the way inside myself. I wait, breath held, for him to say something—anything—else, but before he can, the front door flies open, letting in a huge gust of freezing air. ~~one of the people rushing by knocks him from behind.~~

It breaks the spell and suddenly we’re just two people standing in a crowded hallway again. Disappointment wells inside of me, especially when Jaxon takes a step back, his face set once again in inscrutable lines.

I wait for him to say something—anything—but he doesn’t. Instead, he just watches as Flint herds Macy and me toward the open door. As we cross the threshold, I raise my hand in a small good-bye wave.

I don’t expect him to return it—and he doesn’t—but just as I turn away to take my first step outside, he says, “Don’t forget to build an arsenal.”

They’re pretty much the last words I expect to hear from him...or anyone, for that matter. “An arsenal?”

Commented [ep31]: All about the what? I don’t get it.

Commented [TD32R32]: Yeah, I have no idea what I was going for there, lol

Commented [ep33]: I would think this sort of thing would NEVER happen. People would go out of their way not to accidentally piss him off. what about just the sound of people laughing as they run past breaks the spell?

“It’s the most important part of winning a snowball fight. Find a base you can protect and concentrate on building up your arsenal. Only attack when you’re sure you have enough ammunition to win.”

Snowballs. Here I was, convinced we had just shared a moment, and he’s thinking about snowballs. Fan-~~freaking~~-tastic.

“Ummm-...-thanks for the advice?” I give him a wtf look.

Jaxon ~~gives me~~responds with the same oldhis regular, annoying blank face~~-in response~~, but I swear his eyes are sparkling just a little. “It’s good advice. You should take it.”

“Why don’t *you* take it? Join us and help me build a bigger arsenal.”

He lifts a brow. “And here I thought that’s exactly what I have been doing.”

“What does *that* mean?” I demand.

But he’s already turning away, already *walking* away, and I’m left staring after him.

As usual.

Damn it.

~~What did he mean? Something tells me this boy—and his world-famous disappearing act—~~
~~-is going to be the death of me.~~

Ch

~~Ch~~apter Nineteen

Midwinter Madness

“Jaxon Vega, huh?” Flint asks as the cold slaps me in the face for the second time today.

“Don’t start,” I say, giving him the side eye.

“I’m not,” he answers, holding both hands up in mock surrender. “I swear.” He’s silent for a minute or so as the three of us concentrate on trudging through the snow toward everyone else. And can I just say that I’m pretty sure Macy undersold the crowd when she said fifty people. Even in the weird civil twilight that surrounds us on all sides, it looks more like a hundred, maybe even the whole damn school—~~minus Jaxon and his friends, of course.~~

On the plus side, at least they’re all wearing hats and scarves and coats...-which I’m taking to mean that not everyone in this place is an actual alien. Thankfully.

“I just didn’t know screwed up and obnoxious was your type, that’s all.”

I shoot him a glare. “I thought you weren’t starting.”

“I’m not. I’m just looking out for you. Jaxon is—” “

“*Not* screwed up.”

He laughs. “I notice you didn’t even try to say he wasn’t obnoxious though, did you? And no offense, Grace, but you’re new here. You have no idea just how ~~fucked screwed~~ up he is.”

“And you do?”

“Yeah. And so does Macy. Right, Mace?”

Macy doesn’t answer, just keeps walking and pretends like she doesn’t hear him. I’m beginning to wish I could do the same.

“All right, all right, I get it.” Flint shakes his head. “I won’t say anything else against the Chosen One. Except tell you to be careful.”

“We’re just friends, Flint.”

“Yeah, well, take it from someone who knows. Jaxon doesn’t have friends.”

I want to ask him what he means by that considering Jaxon’s got the Order and they seem pretty damn close to me, but we’ve reached the first row of trees, where the others are gathered. Plus, I’m the one who just said I didn’t want to talk about Jaxon. If I start asking questions, that gives Flint carte blanche to say whatever he wants, and that doesn’t seem fair since Jaxon isn’t around to defend himself.

Flint walks into the middle of the group like he owns the place. Then again, judging from the way the others respond to him, maybe he does. It’s not that they all come to attention, necessarily. It’s just obvious that they all really want him to notice them—...and they all really do want to hear what he has to say.

I can’t help wondering what that kind of popularity is like. I don’t want it—would probably melt under the pressure of it in less than twenty-four hours. But I do wonder what it feels like. And how Flint feels about it.

I don’t have long to dwell on my thoughts, though, because Flint gets started giving a quick rundown of the rules—one that sounds an awful lot like *there are no rules*, except the one that says if you get hit by five snowballs you’re out—and then disperses the crowd. As the five minute countdown starts, he grabs Macy’s and my hands and starts running with us toward a large thicket of evergreen and aspen trees several hundred yards away.

“We’ve got two minutes to find a good spot,” he says. “Another two and a half to get things together. Then it’s open season.”

“But if everyone finds a spot, who will we have to throw sno—” “

“They won’t,” Flint and Macy interrupt me at the exact same time.

Commented [ep34]: lol

“Don’t worry,” Flint tells me as we finally reach the trees. “There will be plenty of people to wage war on.”

Wage war? I can barely breathe. It’s a combination of the high altitude and cold air, I know, but I can’t help feeling self-conscious about the way I’m huffing and puffing. Especially since he and Macy both sound like they just finished a leisurely garden stroll.

“So what do we do now?” I ask, even though it’s fairly obvious considering Flint is already scooping up snow and making it into balls.

“Build up our arsenal.” He gives me a wicked grin. “Just because I think Jaxon is a jackass dangerous, doesn’t mean the guy doesn’t know strategy.”

We spend the next several minutes making as many snowballs as we possibly can. I half-expect Macy and Flint to outpace me here, too, but it turns out all those years of making pastries—and patting dough into balls—with my mother paid off, because I am an *excellent* snowball maker. Totally kickass. And I’m twice as fast as they are.

“Coming up on five minutes,” Macy says, her phone ringing with a fifteen second warning.

“Move, move, move,” Flint calls out, even as he grabs my wrist and dragushoosrges me behind the closest tree.

Just in time, too, because as soon as Macy’s phone screeches out the five minute mark, all hell breaks loose. Literally.

People drop from the trees all around us, snowballs flying fast and furious in every direction. Others run by at breakneck speeds, lobbing them kamikaze style at anyone within range.

Commented [ep35]: I think you need a different word for how FLINT would describe him. A tool? lolol

Commented [TD36R36]: lolol

Commented [ep37]: Everyone in this book grabs her and drags her places. Well except Jaxon. lol

One snowball whizzes right past my ear, and I breathe a sigh of relief until another one slams into my side—even with the tree, and Flint, for cover.

“That’s one,” I hiss, jerking to the right to avoid another snowball flying straight at me. It hits Flint in the shoulder instead and he mutters a low curse.

“Are we going to hide back here all day?” Macy demands from where she’s crouched at the base of a nearby tree. “Or are we going to get in this thing?”

“By all means,” Flint says, gesturing for her to go first.

She rolls her eyes at him, but it only takes her a few seconds to scoop snow into a couple of giant snowballs. Then she’s pushing off and running straight for our arsenal, letting her snowballs fly with a giant war whoop that practically shakes the snow off nearby branches.

I follow her into the fray, a snowball clutched in my gloved hands as I wait for a perfect opportunity to use it.

The opportunity presents itself when a large guy one of the large guys from Flint’s group comes barreling toward me, snowballs hidden in the bottom of the jacket he’s turned into a carrying pouch. He sends them flying at me, one after another, but I manage to dodge them all. Then I throw my snowball as hard as I can, straight at him. It hits him in his very surprised face.

We’ve built up about a hundred snowballs in our arsenal, and we use them all as more and more people pour through the forest, looking for a place to hide as they catch their breaths and try to make a few extra snowballs of their own.

I’m a little surprised at how close knit the different groups are—and how alliances transcend snowball teams and seem to revert back to the factions I noticed at the party yesterday. Even though members of Flint’s clique are divided into duos and trips, they all seem to come together and watch each other’s backs when someone from one of the other factions—whether

Commented [SA38]: Could the snowball fight be an opportunity to show the looming war/faction issues a little earlier on? The factions seem like something that isn’t explored enough. I want a really clear distinction, but I’m not even sure which they all are. Vamps, shifters, witches, I guess? But what is their beef with each other and how does it play out in everyday life? What’s the straw that’s going to break the camel’s back? Etc. It should be more ever-present.

it's the slender group dressed in bright jewel tones or the more muscular group that Marc and Quinn are currently fighting with—threatens one of them.

I also notice that one group is missing—Jaxon's. Not just The Order, which is definitely not here, but the whole black clothed designer faction that presided over the party with such obvious disdain. Guess Jaxon was right when he said Flint didn't want him here ...

Part of me wants to try to figure out what is up with that, but right now I'm too busy dodging snowball volleys to do more than give it a passing thought.

It's total guerilla warfare out here—fast and brutal and winner takes all. It's also the most fun I've had since my parents died, and probably even longer than that.

 We exhaust our supply of snowballs pretty quickly and then we're just like everyone else, running through the trees trying to g-to find cover as we fling snowballs at whoever's within reach.

I laugh like a crazy person the whole time. Macy and Flint look bemused at first, but soon they're laughing with me—especially when one or the other of us gets hit.

It's after an ambush that leads to Macy getting her fourth hit and Flint and me getting our third ones, that we decide to get serious. We find the biggest two trees we can to hide behind, and drop to our knees, packing snowballs as quickly as possible. After we've got about thirty made, Flint yanks off his hat and scarf and starts piling them inside-.

“What are you doing?” I demand. “You're going to freeze to death out here.”

“I'm fine,” he tells me, as he turns his scarf into a kind of carrying pack. “This is our chance to win.”

“How?” I ask. There’s chaos all around us and though the others haven’t found our hiding spot yet, it’s only a matter of time—probably a minute or two—before they do. And while we’ve got ammunition, there’s also a lot fewer of us than there is of them.

“By climbing the trees,” Macy tells me.

Before I can express my utter incredulity at the thought of climbing one of the gigantic, leafless aspens—the lowest branches are over fifteen feet off the ground—she runs straight at the trunk of the closest tree. She jumps, and kicks out hard enough to send herself soaring up several feet at an angle, arms extended, to grab the branch of a neighboring tree. She hangs there for a few seconds, swinging back and forth to gain momentum, then thrusts herself up and onto a nearby branch.

The whole thing takes about ten seconds.

“Did she just do parkour against that tree?” I ask Flint before turning to Macy. “Did you just parkour that tree?”

Commented [ep39]: lol

“I did,” she says with a laugh, then reaches down to catch the hat full of snowballs Flint sends flying her way.

“That’s freaking awesome. But if you guys expect me to be able to do that, I think we’re all going to be disappointed.”

“Don’t worry, Grace,” Flint tells me as he thrusts his snowball packed scarf into my arms. “Just hold onto these for me, will you?”

“Of course. What are you going to—” “—” I let out a screech as he grabs onto me and throws me over his shoulder.

“Quiet down or you’re going to give away our hiding place,” he ~~tells me~~ says as he starts climbing the tree like some Alaskan version of Spiderman, hands and feet practically sticking to the tree’s bark as he carries me up the gigantic trunk. “And don’t drop the snowballs.”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to hang me upside down,” I snark at him. But I tighten my grip on the stupid scarf.

I don’t know how he’s doing it and I wouldn’t believe it if I wasn’t witnessing—or should I say experiencing—it for myself. But thirty seconds later, I’m straddling a tree branch, snowballs in hand as I wait to ambush the first people who come by.

Flint’s on a branch several feet above mine. It’s high enough off the ground to make me whimper just looking up at him, but he’s standing there with a huge grin on his face, like balancing on a snow packed tree branch is the easiest thing in the world.

Which—to be clear—it definitely is not. And I know that because I’m *sitting* on one and I still feel like I could slip off any second.

“Someone’s coming!” Macy hisses from one tree over.

I glance down at the ground and realize she’s right—~~Quinn, Marc and two other guys~~ ~~area group of four guys is~~ heading our way. They’re moving stealthily instead of quickly, almost like they know we’re here. And maybe they do—it’s not like I was exactly quiet while Flint hauled me up this stupid tree.

Either way it doesn’t matter, because all we need is for them to get a few steps closer and—

Bam. Flint sends a snowball soaring straight into the leader’s chest. Macy follows up with a one, two shot to the guy in the back. Which leaves ~~Marc and Quinn~~ ~~the two middle ones~~ ~~for me.~~

Which I'm definitely not going to complain about. I send a volley of snowballs straight at them, one after another. I hit ~~one Marcguy~~ twice and ~~the other three times, Quinn at least four times~~ which—if their curse-laden complaints are anything to go by—knocks them completely out of ~~the game. Something I'm also not going to complain about. the game.~~

Flint is all but crowing in triumph as he dispatches a second group that made the mistake of coming this way, and Macy takes care of couple of loners trying to sneak in from behind us. I restock from the thick snow on the branches and wait for whoever comes next.

Turns out it's a couple of girls dressed in teal and navy outerwear, who look like they're having about as much fun as I do at the dentist...-which is to say, none at all.

I think about pulling my punches—no reason to make them even more miserable—but I figure it's only putting off the inevitable. The faster I knock them out of the game, the faster they can head back to the castle. And the faster we can win this thing.

I reach for my last three snowballs and am just waiting for them to come within range when a powerful wind comes up and knocks me off balance. I make a grab for the tree trunk, and manage to hold on while the wind shakes the whole tree.

Flint curses and makes a grab for the trunk, too. Then calls to me, "Hold on, Grace! I'll be there in a minute."

"Just hold on," I call back. "I'm fine."

Then I turn to look for Macy, worried my cousin might be in worse shape than me. But just as I turn my head to look behind me, another gust of wind hits the tree, hard. It's an eerie sound, and as the trunk starts to sway under the wind's assault, I get more nervous. Especially when another gust comes through and hits me hard enough to threaten my grip on the tree.

Above me, Flint curses again ~~and. Then yells, Macy yells, "I'm coming. Hold on, Grace! Flint, go get her!" Just hold on another few seconds."~~

"Wait!" I shout back to be heard over the wind, "Don't!"

But then Macy screams and I whirl around, terrified I'm going to see her plunging to her death. And that's when the worst gust of wind yet hits and I lose my grip on the tree completely.

I scramble to grab onto something—anything—but the wind is too strong. The branch I'm sitting on issues an ominous crack. And then I'm falling.

Chapter Twenty

It's Not the Fall Down the Rabbit Hole that Kills You, It's the Landing

For one second I have perfect clarity—I can hear Macy screaming, Flint calling my name, the wind roaring like a freight train—and then it's all drowned out in the panicked beat of my heart as terror races through me.

I brace myself for bone-crunching impact, but before I hit, Flint is grabbing me, pulling me against him, spinning us mid-air. He hits the ground, back first, and I land on him, my face buried in the curve of his neck.

We hit hard enough that the breath is knocked out of me. For one second, two, three, I can't do anything but lay there on top of him, trying desperately to drag a breath into my abused lungs.

Flint's not moving either and panic is a wild animal inside of me as I struggle into a sitting position. His eyes are closed and I'm terrified that he's hurt—or worse. He took the brunt of the fall, deliberately spinning us so that he slammed into the hard, snow-packed ground while all I slammed into was him.

It's as I push up into a sitting position—knees on either side of his thighs—that I finally manage to pull in a huge gulp of air. It's also at that moment that all hell breaks loose.

Macy is screaming my name as she scrambles down her tree and people swarm us from all directions. I'm too busy shaking Flint and slapping at his cheeks—trying to get him to respond—to pay any attention to what anyone else is doing.

At least until he opens his eyes and drawls, “I’m beginning to think I should have let you fall.”

“Oh my God! You’re okay!” I scramble off of him. “Are you okay?”

“I think so.” He pushes into a sitting position with a little groan. “You’re heavier than you look.”

“You shouldn’t move!” I try to shove him back down, but he just laughs.

“The snow broke my fall, Grace. I’m good.” To prove it, he jackknifes to his feet in one lithe movement.

It’s as he stands up that I realize he’s telling the truth. There’s a Flint shaped indentation in the snow from where he hit. For the first time since moving to this state, I’m grateful for its ridiculous climate. After all, when you’re falling twenty feet, snow is so much softer than ground.

Still, if that’s the case... “Why did you jump after me? It was a stupid thing to do. You could have been hurt.”

He doesn’t answer, just kind of stands there watching me, a weird look in his eyes. It’s not concern or annoyance or pride or any of the other expressions I’d expect him to be wearing right now. Instead, it looks an awful lot like...-shame.

But that doesn’t make sense. He just saved me from a concussion or a couple broken bones—at least. What does he have to be ashamed of?

“What was the alternative?” Macy demands, voice shaking like she just got back the power of speech. “Let you be hurt?”

“You mean it’s better for Flint to get hurt?” I shoot back.

“But he didn’t, did he? And neither did you.” She turns to him with a grateful look.

“Thank you so much, Flint.”

Her words make me realize that I’ve been too busy worrying about—and yelling at—Flint to do what I should have right away. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

The words sound awkward after all my admonishments, but they are nothing compared to the look on Flint’s face as he stares over my shoulder into the crowd. It alternates between looking like he’s going to throw a punch and, to looking like he’s dying to run away.

I figure it’s because he’s bad with gratitude—I’m terrible with it, so I get that—but as the talking in the crowd dies down and people start parting like a human Red Sea, I turn to see what’s happening.

And nearly wither on the spot at the coldness in Jaxon’s eyes. Only the fact that it’s directed at Flint and not me keeps my knees from giving way completely. Because I only thought he was intimidating at the welcome party.

Right now, the look on his face is absolutely terrifying. And the five inscrutable guys at his back— I assume I’m seeing the whole of the infamous Order for the first time, I assume—only reinforce the fact that there’s a problem.

A big problem.

I just wish I knew why.

Even Flint, who has never reacted to Jaxon before, turns a little pale. And that’s before Jaxon—in the coldest, most reasonable voice imaginable— asks him, “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

It’s the tone even more than the look that has me moving, a frisson of fear working its way down my spine as I position myself between him and Flint before an all-out brawl can take

Commented [ep40]: I thought there were only four?

Commented [TD41R41]: No, they are five—they just haven’t all been together up until now.

place. I may not understand all the nuances of what's happening here, but it's obvious that Jaxon is livid—and more than ready to take it out on Flint. Which makes no sense considering, “I fell, Jaxon. Flint saved me.”

For the first time, he turns those cold eyes on me. “Did he?”

“Yes! The wind kicked up and I lost my balance. I fell out of the tree and Flint jumped after me.” I shoot Flint a look, telling him to back me up, but he's not looking at me.

He's not looking at Jaxon, either. Instead, he's staring off into the distance, jaw and fists clenched.

“What's wrong?” I ask, reaching out to touch his shoulder. “Are you hurt, after all?”

A fine tremor runs through the earth, a tiny little earthquake that rattles the tree branches a little but doesn't do anything else. It's the third one I've felt since I've been in Alaska, so it doesn't surprise me when no one reacts. Even I don't get too excited. In San Diego, we'd have one or two of these tiny ones every couple of months.

Flint doesn't even notice. He's too busy shrugging off my hand. “I'm fine, Grace.”

“Then what's wrong?” I look back and forth between him and Jaxon. “I don't understand what's happening here.”

Neither of them answers me, so I look to Macy for an explanation beyond my working hypothesis that Alaska turns people *insane*. But she looks as confused as I do—and about a hundred times more terrified.

As for everybody else...they're riveted by the drama, eyes glued to Jaxon as he continues to watch Flint who continues to very obviously not watch him back. It's not the first time I've thought of Jaxon as a hunter, but it is the first time I've thought of Flint as prey. Other

members of his group must agree, because in seconds they're moving--guys and girls alike—to flank him on either side.

Their obvious support of Flint only ups the tension between him and Jaxon, who's face has grown even more coldly amused.

I'm trying desperately to figure out how to break things up without bloodshed when Macy suddenly

Suddenly, Macy snaps out of whatever stupor she's been in and-and says, grabs my armsays,

"We should go back to the room, Grace. Make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," I tell her, completely exasperated. Like I'm going to leave Jaxon out here when he looks like he wants to rip Flint's throat out just for breathing. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Actually, that's the best idea I've heard all afternoon." Jaxon takes a step closer, until he's right behind me. He doesn't touch me, doesn't even brush against me, but he's close enough that that doesn't matter. I can *feel* him. "I'll walk you back to your room."

The crowd recoils at this. Like I actually see people drawing back, eyes wide, mouths open, faces slack with shock. I can't figure out what the big deal is unless it's that Jaxon is breaking up the a showdown between the two most popular guys at school before it even begins. ~~But it's not~~ Not that it's even a real showdown, ~~not-with-the-way~~ considering the way Flint's taken himself out of the whole thing by refusing to so much as acknowledge Jaxon's existence.

It's that uncharacteristic behavior more than any other that has me stepping away from Jaxon and saying, "I need to stay with Flint. Make sure he's really—"^{???}

"I'm fine, Grace," Flint grates out from between clenched teeth. "Just go ~~with Jaxon~~."

“Are you sure?” I reach out a hand to touch his shoulder, but suddenly Jaxon’s there between us, preventing my hand from landing. Then he’s stepping forward, moving me slowly, inexorably, away from Flint and back toward school.

It’s the craziest thing I’ve ever seen. Definitely the craziest thing I’ve ever been a part of.

And still, I let it happen. Because this is Jaxon. ~~and I can’t seem to help myself.~~

“Come on, Macy,” I say quietly to my cousin and reach for her hand. “Let’s go.”

She nods and then we’re walking back toward the castle—Macy, Jaxon, and me. I half expect the other members of the Order to join us, but a quick glance behind me shows that they aren’t moving.

No one is.

And can I just say, I’m beginning to feel an awful lot like Alice in Wonderland here—things keep getting “curiouser and curiouser.” Maybe that last plane ride with Philip was really a trip down ~~a really big~~ the rabbit hole.

We walk in silence for a minute or two, and with each step I’m beginning to realize maybe I didn’t escape from the fall unscathed after all. Now that the adrenaline was worn off, my right ankle is hurting. A lot.

To keep my mind off the pain—and to keep Jaxon and Macy from noticing that I’m limping—I ask, “What are you doing out here, anyway? I thought you weren’t going to join the snowball fight.”

“Good thing I was out here, considering the mess Flint got you into.” Jaxon doesn’t so much as glance my way.

“It ~~really is~~ ’s no big deal,” I tell him, despite the fact that my ankle is working its way up from painful to excruciating pretty quickly now. “Flint had me. He—”

“Flint very definitely did not have you,” he ~~says~~snaps, his voice as hard and brittle as the ice all around us as he turns like ice~~snaps, turning and turns~~ to face me for the first time. “In fact—” “He stops, eyes narrowing. “What’s wrong?””

“Besides not being able to figure out why you’re so mad?”

He shrugs off the question as he looks me over from head to toe. “What’s hurting you?”

“I’m fine—” “

“You’re hurt, Grace?” Macy joins the conversation for the first time. The chicken.

“It’s nothing.” We’ve got a head start, but if we stop, the others are sure to catch up with us and the last thing I need right now is to make an even bigger spectacle of myself. So much for fitting in...or even, *blending* in. After tonight, I might as well be painted biohazard orange.

Something I find particularly ironic since Jaxon is the one who told me to keep my head down.

But seriously. It’s just like San Diego all over again. There, I was the girl whose parents had died. Here, I’m the girl who fell out of a tree and nearly caused World War III between the two hottest guys in school.

FML.

Determined to make it back to school—and my room—before the others head this way, I start walking again. Or, should I say, try to start walking again because I don’t get very far before Jaxon is blocking my path.

“What hurts?” he asks again, and the look on his face tells me he’s not going to let it go.

And since arguing with him wastes precious seconds, I finally give in. “My ankle. I must have twisted it when we hit the ground.

Jaxon's kneeling at my feet before I finish, gently probing at my foot and ankle through my boot.

"I can't take this off out here or you'll get frostbite. But does it hurt when I do this?"

My gasp is the only answer he needs.

"Should I run ahead and get the snowmobile?" Macy asks. "I can be back before too long."

Oh my God, no. Talk about making a spectacle of myself. "I can walk. Honest. I'm okay."

Jaxon shoots both of us an incredulous look as he helps me to my feet. Then—without a word—he swoops me into his arms.

Chapter Twenty-One

I Like Standing on My Own Two Feet, But Getting Swept Off Them Feels Surprisingly Good

For long seconds, I can't move. I can't think. I can only stare up at him in a kind of open-mouthed shock as my brain short circuits. Because I'm not actually in Jaxon's arms, right? I mean, I can't be.

_____-Except I am. And they feel really good around me. *Really good*. Plus, being in his arms—bride style—gives me an up close and personal view of his face. And can I just say how unfair it is that he’s even hotter from an inch away? And he smells amazing, too.

_____-His smell—like ~~snoweranges~~ and bergamot—is what pushes me over the edge, what has me struggling against him like a madwoman in my effort to be put back down. Because if he carries me all the way to school looking and smelling and feeling like he does, I’m going to be a total, incoherent mess.

_____-“Can you please stop wiggling around so much?” he demands as I attempt to jackknife out of his arms.

“Just let me down, then.” I glance at Macy for support, but she’s staring at us like her ~~eyes are about to bug out of her head~~ head is about to explode. Since she’s clearly ~~not~~ going to be ~~of no help, so~~any help, I turn back to Jaxon. “You can’t carry me all the way back to school!”

There isn’t so much as a hitch in his stride. “Watch me.”

“Jaxon, be reasonable. It’s a long walk.”

“What’s your point?”

I squirm around some more, trying to force him to put me down, but that just makes him tighten his hold.

“My point is I’m too heavy.”

Again with the incredulous look.

“I’m serious.” I put my hands on his chest and use real effort to push. His arms don’t budge from around me. If I’m being honest, I really don’t want him to put me down. My ankle is

Commented [ep42]: Which is what?? lol

Commented [TD43R43]: • an oily substance extracted from the rind of the fruit of a dwarf variety of the Seville orange tree. It is used in cosmetics and as flavoring in tea.

•2.the tree which bears a variety of Seville orange from which bergamot is extracted.

•3.an aromatic North American herb of the mint family.

Commented [ep44]: Reword at will but Macy just disappears in this scene and I gotta think she’d at least sputter something OR awkwardly look anywhere but at them. lol

full on throbbing now and walking on it is going to be a nightmare. But that doesn't mean I should let him ~~hurt~~damage himself trying to help me. "Put me down before you hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself?" The eyebrow arch I spent way too much time thinking about last night is back. "Are you *trying* to insult me?"

"I'm trying to get you to let go of me. You can't carry me all the way back to—"”“

"Grace?" he interrupts.

I wait for him to say something, but when he doesn't, I answer, "What?" in what could, perhaps, be described as not the nicest tone.

"Shut up."

Part of me is super insulted at his words—and the matter-of-fact way he says them, but the part of me that's actually in control of my tongue does exactly what he asks and shuts up. I mean, I suppose there are worse things in the world than being carried by a super sexy guy instead of struggling along in terrible pain. Maybe.

With me in Jaxon's arms, we move three times as fast as we were when I was limping with every step. Before I know it, we're through the castle door, striding up the stairs, and he's depositing me on my bed and pulling off my boot.

"I can take it from here," I tell him. "Thanks for your help."

He shoots me a look that tells me to shut up, this time without him ever having uttered the words. Which pisses me off so much that I yank my foot away from him and start peeling my socks off on my own.

"I sprained my ankle," I snark. "I'm not dying of consumption."

"Yeah, well, the night is young."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" I glare at him.

“It means you’ve been here three days, and this is the second time I’ve had to get you out of trouble.”

“Seriously? You’re going to hold me responsible for a *wind storm* now?”

“I am.” He wraps his hand around my calf and gently but firmly eases my leg over the edge of the bed so he can look at my ankle. “You didn’t see Macy falling out of *her* tree, did you?”

“It wasn’t—” Macy starts, but Jaxon keeps talking like she doesn’t even exist.

“*Her* branch didn’t break. *Mine* did. What was I supposed to do? Grab onto the trunk and—Oww!” I try to yank my foot away as he probes at a particularly sore spot.

He ignores me, though his touch—already soft—gets even more gentle. “There’s no swelling and only a little bruising, so I don’t think you broke anything.”

“I already told you it was just sprained.” I pull my leg away, with much less force this time. Something about the feel of his hands on my leg—his skin against mine-- his skin on mine has me especially unnerved. “You can go now.”

This time the look he gives me is half-amused, half don’t push your luck. And—despite that—all sexy af. Which is completely absurd, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Heather would die if she saw me now—two small steps away from whimpering and sighing over some
Because this is Jaxon and when doesn’t he look sexy? My god, how did I not ever know I had
such a hard-on for ridiculously commanding boys? It’s gross, and normally I’d put him in his place. But the fact that he’s all growly like this because he’s worried about me and wanting to make sure I’m okay? I don’t know. Somehow it makes a difference.

“Should I get ice?” Macy asks for the first time since Jaxon overrode her objection. She’s
currently standing near her bed, all but wringing her hands and trying not to show how freaked

Commented [ep45]: I dunno, we need something here that makes it more acceptable she loves being ordered around and talked down to. At least call herself out for it.

Commented [TD46]:

~~out she is that Jaxon is in our room., shocked I'd not even noticed she'd come into the room with us.~~

Commented [TD47]: Stet—I already added her in above

I turn to answer ~~—and hopefully reassure her-- her --- at least~~ until I realize she's talking to Jaxon. You know, the guy she spent ten minutes warning me about *before* the snowball fight. “Et tu, Brute?” I snap.

~~She shrugs, a little shamefaced, as Jaxon answers, “~~

“That’d be great.” ~~Then she all but runs to the door—at least until h~~He smiles his thanks. ~~Then she and she~~ freezes. Like, literally *freezes* in the middle of walking, one foot off the floor. “Also, do you happen to have an Ace bandage? I can wrap her foot before I go.”

She doesn’t answer.

“Macy?” She still doesn’t answer.

Jaxon glances at me, both brows raised, but I just roll my eyes. Then clap extra loud to get her attention.

“Macy?”

“Oh, yeah. Ice. I’m on it.”

“So, no bandage then?” Jaxon asks.

“And a bandage. Yes. Absolutely. I have a few, actually.” Suddenly she’s stumbling over her words and her feet as she rushes to her bureau and starts wildly opening drawers.

She finally finds what she’s looking for in the bottom drawer and spins around, a tightly wrapped ~~bandage in~~ hot pink bandage in her hand. “Does this work, Jaxon?”

“It’s perfect, thanks.”

She glows under his praise, and it's all I can do not to make another snarky comment. But seriously, if she's not careful, she's going to melt into a puddle right here in the middle of our room. So much for you can tell me how he hurt you. Traitor.

I reach out to try to take the bandage from her, but Jaxon gets there first. "I really can do it, you know," I tell him.

"I know you can. Maybe I want to do it for you."

As she heads for the door, Macy makes a sound like the melting is actually starting and even I have to admit, it's a good line. Then again, convincing myself to like Jaxon has never been hard. I've been attracted to him from the very beginning, even when I was also supremely annoyed by him.

"What? No protests?" he asks a little sardonically.

"Are you going to wrap it or not?" I demandgrousesigh, ignoring his question because answering it would be too embarrassing.

He ducks his head and gets to work, but not before I see the little grin he's got going on. His scar pulls on the very edges of his lips, but that just turns the smile into a crooked little smirk that is a million times hotter than it should be.

His fingers are cold as he wraps up my ankle, but his hands are so, so gentle. I find myself relaxing despite myself, my muscles going lax as he strokes a finger back and forth against my calf.

And when I say his name this time, even I can hear the yearning. His head snaps up, his gaze locking with mine. His eyes are wide, his pupils blown out until there's only a thin rim of their dark coffee color brown around the wide black center.

Commented [ep48]: But his eyes have been described as black the whole book.

His hand on my leg becomes firmer, more insistent as he leans in just a little. His insanely sexy scent—~~bergamot and oranges and just a little cinnamon~~— seems even stronger now than it did when he was carrying me. It fills my senses, makes my mouth water and my hands ache to touch him. Makes me want to press my face into the curve of his neck and just breathe him in.

I'm already on edge from his closeness and these new longings he sets off in me have my breath catching in my throat. My heart goes crazy and, as he leans in just a little further, my whole body lights up like the aurora borealis I'm still dying to see.

"Grace." He says my name like it's a promise. It's the last straw and I gasp, full on melting commencing deep inside of me. I'd say his name back, but I've lost control of my vocal chords. And pretty much the rest of my body, too.

His hand comes up to cup my cheek and I close my eyes, lean into the caress. And then nearly jump out of my skin as the door crashes open and he yanks his hand back.

"I've got the ice," Macy says. "I even crushed it up and—" "She stops cold, her eyes going wide as she senses the tension in the air. With the way Jaxon is leaning over me, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what she interrupted, and for a second it looks like she's going to ease her way back out of the room.

But then the moment is gone, and Jaxon is standing up, heading toward the door himself. "Put the ice on for twenty minutes, and see how it feels. If it isn't better, ice it again in an hour. Got it?"

"Yeah, I've got it," I manage to croak out of my still tight throat.

“Good.” He risks giving Macy another smile, then shakes his head as she whimpers just a little. He doesn’t say anything else until he’s about to walk out of my room. Then he turns around, hand on the doorknob, and says, “Stay away from Flint, Grace. He’s not good for you.”

The words chase away the last of my vocal paralysis—and good will. “Flint and I are friends. And you don’t get to tell me what to do.” I have just enough self control not to add, *no matter how much I like you.*

I expect him to fire back with something—God knows, he’s arrogant enough to believe he should be instantly obeyed—but instead he just tilts his head and watches me for several long seconds. Then he says, “Okay.”

“Okay?” “—” I narrow my eyes at his easy acquiescence. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” He turns to go.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

He gives me his inscrutable look, the one I’m already coming to hate. “This is going to be a lot of things, Grace. Easy isn’t one of them.”

And then he’s gone. As usual.

Double damn it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Baby, It's Hot in Here ...

For several seconds after Jaxon leaves, I wait for the other shoe to drop—... In this case, a rainbow-colored Converse in the form of Macy demanding to know what's going on between us. Which I can already see is going to be a problem on a lot of levels, most obviously the one where I have *no idea about what's going on between us*. If anything. Yes, Jaxon has sought me out twice today, but I have no idea what that means. Or even if it means anything.

And what was that parting shot about, anyway? *This is going to be a lot of things, but easy isn't one of them?* Who even says that? Was he trying to say that he's interested in me? Or trying to say that he isn't?

Ugh. Why do boys have to be so complicated? From the day we met, Jaxon's been giving me mixed signals and it's driving me nuts. Isn't it bad enough that my parents died and I had to leave everything I know to come here, to freaking Alaska, and nearly die? Twice? Why can't this one thing—this one boy—be easy?

Maybe he's just playing with me because he's bored or something. Because I'm fresh meat out here in the middle of nowhere. But he didn't look bored when we were out there—in fact, he looked pissed as hell at Flint. Which is ridiculous considering Flint saved me from a concussion or a broken leg or worse.

But a guy who isn't interested doesn't act like Jaxon did, right? He doesn't have the kind of temper tantrum—and it was a tantrum, despite how cold it was—that Jaxon had in the middle of that forest because he thought Flint had put me at risk.

Does he?

I don't think so...but then, what do I know? I've only ever had one boyfriend and the way I felt about Gabe was ~~---~~nothing like this. I mean, it was a decent relationship, I guess. We had been friends for years and it just kind of drifted into more for a while. We went places together, made out sometimes, did all the usual stuff. But it was easy with Gabe. He never made me feel like Jaxon does, never made my breath catch and my hands sweat and my stomach flip from just a look. I never spent hours obsessing over his every word, never found myself longing for his touch the way I do for Jaxon's.

I just wish I knew how ~~Jaxon~~~~he~~ felt.

"Oh ~~my-my~~ God."

Apparently, Macy has finally snapped out of whatever weird Jaxon-induced coma she's been in for the last five minutes. I shoot her a look. "Don't start."

"Oh. My. God. OhmygodOhmygodOhmygod. What just happened?"

"I fell out of a tree. Flint saved me from dying. Jaxon carried me back to the dorm because I sprained my ankle." I say it all very flippantly, hoping if I keep it casual—if I don't let Macy know how messed up my own head is~~---~~she'll let things drop.

"Those are just the details." She flops down on my bed, careful not to jostle my ankle as she does.

"I'm pretty sure the details are what's important here."

"Not right now they aren't! Right now, it's all about big picture."

"And what exactly is the big picture?" I ask.

"The big picture is that the two most popular boys in school are crazy about you."

I nearly strangle myself on my sweatshirt as I try to get a look at her face to see if she's kidding or not. "I wouldn't say they're crazy about me," I finally manage to get out once I untie my hoodie strings and stop strangling myself in the process. "And aren't you the one who was just warning me to stay as far away from Jaxon as I could get?"

"Yeah, but that was before."

"Before what?" I demand.

"Before I saw how he looks at you." She closes her eyes and makes a sound very close to the one she made when Jaxon smiled at her. "I wish Cam would look at me like that."

"You want your boyfriend to look at you like he's an arrogant prick, used to getting his own way?"

"Yeah, he pretty much does that all ready," she says with a roll of her eyes. "I want him to look at me like it physically *hurts* him not to be touching me."

"Jaxon doesn't look at me like that." I'm beginning to think it's how I look at him, though.

Macy snorts. "Baby, if that boy wanted you any more he would spontaneously combust."

Her words warm me, make me feel like *I* might spontaneously combust—especially if I spend much longer thinking about Jaxon. That boy is way too hot for his own good...or my own peace of mind. And if Macy's right, if he's thinking even a quarter of the things I'm thinking about him...

"Is it hot in here?" I demand as I start to shrug out of the million and three layers of clothing I am currently wearing

"After three days of watching you be miserable in the cold, I never thought I'd hear you say that," Macy teases as she grabs hold of my snow pants and starts tugging at them hard

enough to pull me halfway down the bed. “Guess all it takes to warm you up is getting up close and personal with the most dangerous boy at ~~Katsmere~~Katmeres Academy.”

I slap at her hands. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to help you. These things are hard to get out of if you can’t stand.” She yanks and tugs some more and still doesn’t get much accomplished.

“It’s okay, I can do it.” I bat her hands away and stand up so that my weight is balanced on my unhurt leg as I slide off both the snow and fleece pants I’m wearing. Which leaves me in long underwear and wool socks, both of which are a million times more comfortable than the ~~out~~werwear I’d been sweating in.

Macy strips off her own layers and doesn’t say anything else until we’re both settled back on my bed again. Then she looks me straight in the eye and says, “You’ve procrastinated long enough. Now spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill, really.” I slip under the covers and lean my back up against the wall. “You’re the one who said the different factions never mix.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have a faction yet, so apparently the rules don’t apply to you.”

And as for the nothing to spill ... I call

~~“Umm, I call~~ bullshit on that. You’ve been here exactly seventy-two hours—and I’ve been with you most of those hours, by the way. Not all of them, obviously, because I had no idea the two hottest boys in school were going to have a massive pissing contest over you in front of half the senior class.” She gives me an incredulous look. “When did this happen? *How* did this happen?”

“Nothing’s happened, I swear. Flint and I are just friends—” “

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. He’s really nice but he’s never done anything even remotely un-friend-like.”

Macy rolls her eyes. “You mean like carrying you up the staircase or going out of his way to invite you to a snowball fight?”

“You asked him to carry me up the stairs. Altitude sickness, remember?”

“Yeah, and did I also ask him to dive out of a tree to save your life?”

“I’m sure he thought you would have asked if there was time.”

“Oh my God! You are so annoying.” She flops back against the bed. “I can’t decide if you’re lying to yourself or if you’re just this naïve.”

“I’m not lying. And I’m not naïve.” I give her my most sincere look. “I swear, Macy. There’s nothing going on between Flint and me.”

She studies me for a second, then nods. “Okay, fine. But I notice you didn’t say the same thing about you and Jaxon.”

“Jaxon and I... Jaxon is... I mean, we’re... He... I don’t...” I break off, cheeks burning, because even I can tell how incoherent and ridiculous I sound. “Ugh.”

“Wow.” Now Macy’s eyes are huge. “That serious, huh?”

I don’t know what to say, so I almost don’t say anything at all. Except Macy has gone to school here a lot longer than I have, which means she knows a lot more about Jaxon than I do, and I would really like to benefit from a little of that knowledge.

“It’s complicated.”

I expect her to ask what’s complicated about it, but she doesn’t. Instead she just nods like *of course it is*. “He’s not really dangerous, like you said, is he?”

Even as I ask the question, I know the answer-...-which is, hell, yeah, he is. And you should stay as far away from him as you possibly can.

I mean, he's never been anything but gentle when he touched me, but it's as plain as the scar on his face that Jaxon isn't like the other boys I've known. Every single thing about him screams DANGER of the dark and brutally wounded variety.. It's in his eyes, in his voice, in the way he holds himself and the way he moves.

I recognize it, even acknowledge it. But when I'm near him, that doesn't matter.

When I'm near him, *nothing* matters but getting closer to him even though it's,

obvious h-e's been hurt before and just as obvious that he's determined to protect himself. Was it his brother's death that did this to him? Or is Hudson just one piece of a much bigger puzzle?

My instincts say it's the latter, but I haven't known him long enough to be sure.

~~I recognize it, even acknowledge it. But when I'm near him, that doesn't matter.~~

~~When I'm near him, *nothing* matters but getting closer to him.~~

Silence stretches between us for several long seconds. I watch Macy, who pretty much has the opposite of a poker face, as she tries to figure out what to say. It takes a little while, but finally she settles on, "He's not Silence of the Lambs dangerous. He's not going to drop you in a pit and starve you so he can make a dress out of your skin or anything."

I burst into incredulous laughter. "Seriously? That's the best you've got? He's not going to make a dress out of my skin?"

She shrugs. "I also said he wouldn't starve you in a pit."

"It's Alaska. You'd need a professional oil drill to make a pit in the frozen ground."

Commented [ep49]: Let's define not DANGER as in rapist. ☺ Expand a bit more to something like he's had a brutal life and that darkness is still lurking beneath the surface. Be more poetic than just -that boy is on fi-re. (song now stuck in my head lol) We just keep calling him hot and dangerous and I wanted him to appear more complex, which would explain even more why warning bells are going off this is not a boy to fall for but she can't stop, she sees something beneath the surface, like he wants you to think he cares about nothing but it's there, something more, a longing for something she just can't quite place, and that not knowing makes it impossible to not want to find out more.

Commented [ep50]: lol

“Exactly.” She holds her hands out in an obviously gesture. “See, told you he wouldn’t do it.”

“Are you trying to be reassuring here, or are you trying to scare the hell out of me?”

“Yes.” She grins a little sickly. “Is it working?”

“I have no freaking idea.”

My phone buzzes and I almost ignore it. But Heather is pretty much the only one who would be texting me—Macy’s the only one at ~~Katsmere~~Katmeres who’s got my number—and right now, I could use a little of my bff’s brand of sanity.

Heather: How was your first day of classes?

Heather: Any hot guys in your English class?

Heather: Or hot girls? Asking for a friend...

She includes the dtf emoji in the last one and I laugh despite myself. Then take a quick pic of Macy in her tank top and long underwear, who fakes a pouty pose when I say it’s my bff back home, and answer:

Me: ALL the hot girls.

Heather: Ugh. Mean

~~There~~ Heather: How was class?

Me: Altitude sickness kept me home. But I’m going tomorrow

And then, because Heather can go on forever and I really want to finish this conversation about how Jaxon isn’t an actual movie serial killer, I text:

Me: Busy right now

Me: ttys

Then I put my phone aside and turn back to my cousin, who is currently scrolling through her own phone. She quits as soon as she realizes I'm done texting, and then says, "Tell me the truth, Grace. Do you like Jaxon?"

Like is too insipid a word for the emotions Jaxon stirs up in me. There's something about him that calls to me on a soul deep level, something broken in him that somehow fits with what's broken in me.

I know Macy doesn't see it. She's too busy being afraid of his darkness and social status to pay attention to what's under the surface. But I see it--all the grief and pain and fear roiling around in him just beneath the blank face and empty eyes. I see *him*, in a way I don't think anyone else at this school does. I'm not sure how I feel—except that I spend way too much time thinking about him. Way too much time wanting to see him ... and wanting *him*, despite the fact that my cousin can't guarantee he wouldn't dig a pit and drop me in it if we lived in a warmer climate.

I don't tell her any of that, though. I can't, when I can barely admit it to myself—it's not my place to share Jaxon's suffering with anyone else. Instead, I answer, "What does it matter if I like him or not?"

"That's not an answer."

"Because I don't have an answer!" I ~~explode~~ groan. "I've been here three days, Mace. Three days! Everything feels upside down and backwards—and I have no idea what I think about anything...or *anyone*. I mean, how am I supposed to know how I feel about a guy I barely know? Especially when he ignores me one minute and carries me home the next? He's different than anybody I've ever met and—" "

Macy's snort interrupts my diatribe.

Commented [ep51]: I think we can do better here. Let's make her see more in him. Everyone else in this school looks away from him, believes what they see on the surface, where if anyone took a moment to stop and look at him, really look, they'd see someone grieving for something, someone in as much pain as was she.

“What?” I ~~demand~~beg. “~~What’s so funny about what I’m saying~~Why do I get the feeling you know something you’re not sharing?”

“~~I have no idea~~Nothing. Go ahead.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “~~It sounds like you know something~~It didn’t sound like nothing.”

“Sorry.” She holds her hands up in very obvious surrender. “I just~~—...—~~agree. Jaxon is definitely not like anyone you’ve ever met before.”

“You say that like it’s such a bad thing. I get that you don’t want me to like him—” “

“Hey, I told you to stay away from him because he’s not an easy guy to be around. Or at least, he never was before. But with you ...”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “It sounds like every cliché in the book, but he’s different when he’s with you. He’s somehow less intense but also *more* intense, if that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t. At all.”

Macy huffs out a laugh. “I know. But you’re the one who asked. I guess what I’m saying is I’m wary about you and Jaxon doing whatever it is you’re doing, but I’m not totally against it. Not like I would have been if I hadn’t seen him with you today.”

I want to push her on that, want to ask her exactly what she means. But there’s a part of me that’s sure I already have a pretty good idea. She’s talking about the Jaxon I saw in the hall that first day, after Flint carried me up the stairs. Or the Jaxon I saw at the party, the one who looked so cold, so grim, that it sent me running in the opposite direction. Literally. If that’s the only Jaxon she’s ever seen, no wonder she felt the need to warn me off of him.

“I still don’t know what we’re doing,” I admit, slumping into my pillows. “Or even if we’re doing anything. I just wish I knew what he thought about me, you know? Like is he playing with me or is he having some of the same thoughts I’m having?”

“What thoughts are you having?” She asks it so casually that I answer without thinking.

“I feel like I’m obsessed with him. I think about him all the—”^{”“} I break off when I realize what I’m saying. “You tricked me.”

She bats her eyes at me in mock innocence. “I just asked you a question. You didn’t have to answer it.”

“You knew I was preoccupied and wasn’t thinking about guarding my words.”

“Good. I’m glad you weren’t guarding what you say. You don’t have to do that with me.” She reaches out and grabs my hand. “Seriously, Grace. Things are going to be weird here for you for a while. But *we’re* not going to be weird.” She gestures between the two of us. “Even if you can’t trust anybody else, you can trust me to have your back—even with Jaxon. **We’re family.**”

Commented [ep52]: I think that would have more impact b/c she just lost her family.

Suddenly, there’s a lump the size of Denali in my throat, and I swallow a couple of times, trying to clear it. I didn’t know how badly I needed to hear those words until she said them, didn’t realize how much I was missing having someone I can just count on—no questions asked, no matter what—to be in my corner.

“You know that goes both ways, right, Macy? You can trust me, too.”

She grins. “I already do. I just want to make sure you remember what I said. And that I’m here, no matter what, on your side.”

There’s something intense in the way she says it—and the way she looks at me afterwards. Like she’s trying to warn me and reassure me all at the same time. It’s so bizarre that a frisson of unease runs down my spine, taking away the toasty warmth that comes with laying

under my blanket and replacing it with a chill that has nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the feeling that I'm in way over my head here, even if I don't know it yet.

I try to ignore the feeling, tell myself I'm probably just being paranoid. I'm smart—and honest—enough to acknowledge that lately I tend to expect the worst in every situation.

But instead of dwelling in the discomfort, I just nod and say, "Good. I'm glad."

Macy grins. "Now that we've got that out of the way, there is something I want to talk to you about." She gets up, crosses to her mini-fridge. "But I'm pretty sure you're not going to like it."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Never Bring an Ice Cream Scoop to a Gun Fight

I eye Macy warily as she opens up the fridge and rummages around. “Exactly how much am I not going to like it?”

She holds up a pint of Cherry Garcia with a triumphant sound.

My stomach drops. “It’s so bad we need Ben and Jerry’s?”

“To be honest, I always need Ben and Jerry’s.” She pulls the top off the brightly colored container, then grabs two spoons out of ~~off~~ the bright purple utensil cup on top of the fridge.

“This just seems like a good time to indulge.”

I take the spoon she holds out to me. “I didn’t even know they sold Ben and Jerry’s up here.”

“It’s ten bucks a pint at the closest store, but they sell it.” She smiles at my look of horror.

“Wow. That’s...”

She grins. “Welcome to Alaska.”

“Guess what you have to talk about really is serious if it needs ten dollar ice cream.”

She doesn’t say anything to my blatant fishing attempt, just holds the open container out so I can take a spoon of it. Which I do. She does, as well, and we do an ice cream toast—mostly because toasting with the first bite of ice cream is a sacred ritual we’ve had since we were five—before taking a bite.

I wait for Macy to tell me whatever's on her mind, but she just scoops up ~~takes~~ another spoonful of ice cream. Then a third and a fourth, until I give up and do the same.

We're about halfway done with the container before she finally says, "I need to warn you about something."

Okaaaaay? "Haven't you already warned me about Jaxon? I thought that's what we just did?"

"This isn't about him. Or, I mean, I guess it is, but not like you're thinking." I must look as confused as I feel, because suddenly she takes a deep breath and blurts out, "If you like Jaxon—and I'm cool with it if you do, honest—but if you like him, Grace, you can't keep hanging out with Flint, too. It won't work."

That's so far from where I expected her to go that it takes me a second to actually assimilate her words. And even after I decide I understand them, they still they don't make any sense. "What do you mean it won't *work*? I'm not actually dating either one of them right now, and even if I was... Surely I can be friends with the other one?"

"No." She shakes her head emphatically. "You can't. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

I'm half convinced she~~Macey~~'s messing with me—because how could she not be—but she looks so serious I have to ask, "What do you mean I *can't*? What is this? The Breakfast Club?"

"Worse. Way worse."

"Obviously, because even in the Breakfast Club they figured out it didn't matter what group you belong to."

"Isn't the Breakfast Club also the movie where Judd Nelson sexually harasses Molly Ringwald by reaching up her skirt when he's hiding under her~~the~~ desk?"

When she puts it that way... "Okay, so maybe it's not the best example..."

She rolls her eyes. “You think?”

“Even so, this whole Jaxon and Flint can’t be civil to each other because they head up different groups argument you’re making is crazyridiculous. Do you know how many people have been nice to me since I got here?” I hold up four fingers and tick the names off as I say them. “You, Jaxon, Flint, and Lia. That’s it. Four people. Which is why telling me that I can’t talk to one of the four people in this entire place who doesn’t treat me like I have the plague is total bullshit.”

“Oh, Grace.” She looks heartbroken. “Has it really been that bad?”

“Well, it hasn’t exactly been a picnic—even without the near death experiences.” Still, she looks so distraught at my words that I can’t help but walk them back a little. “Don’t worry about it, Mace. I haven’t even started classes yet. I’m sure people will loosen up and stop staring once they have a chance to get to know me.”

She jumps on the walkback. “They will, Grace. I swear. They just need to spend some time with get-to-know you. We don’t get a lot of new people here, and most of us have been together a long time, even before ~~Katsmere~~Katmeres.”

“I didn’t realize that.”^b

“Yeah. There’s another school that most of us went to before this one, starting in fifth grade. So if we seem aloofefeliquish, that’s part of it, you know?”

“Yeah, but, shouldn’t knowing each other that long make it easier for all of you to get along and not harder?”

“It should. And for a while even, it did. I don’t know how to explain why things went bad, except to say that some really awful stuff happened about a year ago and things got completely out of hand. I mean, on the surface it looks like everything’s fine, but once you dig a

little, the damage is all right there. And part of what happened makes it really hard for Jaxon and Flint to be on the same side ~~of . . . of~~ anything.”

It’s pretty much the vaguest explanation anyone has ever given me about anything. And still it has me thinking, trying to piece together the very few things I’ve learned since I’ve been here. “Is this about what happened to Hudson Vega?”

The question is out before I can think twice about it, and judging from the look on Macy’s face, I definitely should have thought twice. “How do you know about Hudson?” she ~~demands~~ ~~whispers~~ ~~asks~~ so quietly that it feels like she’s scared to say his name out loud, ~~and she’s paler than I’ve ever seen her.~~

“Jaxon told me. I mean, Lia told me how her boyfriend had died, but then Jaxon mentioned that his brother was dead, and I put two and two together.”

“Jaxon told you Hudson was dead?” I don’t think she would look this shocked if I told her I was flying back to San Diego ~~under my own power~~ and suddenly all kinds of doubts assail me.

Commented [ep53]: lol

“Isn’t he?” If Jaxon was lying to me about something like that, I don’t know what I’ll do. I mean, what kind of person--

“He is. Yes. It’s just he doesn’t talk about it much. The whole thing almost destroyed him, and I just couldn’t imagine him discussing it with...” ~~s~~She trails off.

“A ~~pretty much~~ total stranger?”

“Yeah.” She looks a little guilty to be admitting it. “Not that you guys are strangers, I guess—” “

“Sometimes it’s easier,” I interrupt. “Talking to your best friend about the worst thing that ever happened to you is excruciating. Talking to a stranger who doesn’t have any kind of

vested interest...sometimes it doesn't hurt ~~soas~~ much." It ~~sounds²s~~ weird, but it's ~~also~~-true. Just one of the things I've learned in the last month.

"That makes a strange kind of sense." She puts the ice cream down and leans over to hug me.

I hug her back for a few seconds—until I feel the tears that are never far from the surface start to well up in my eyes. Then I pull back and give her a grin that says I'm totally fine, even if I'm not. "Maybe that's why it seems like Jaxon is different with me. Because he knows I've lost someone, too."

"Maybe." She looks doubtful. "But if the attraction between you and Jaxon is because you've both lost someone... Just be careful, okay, Grace? The last thing you want is to become the chew toy in a game of tug of war between him and Flint. Because, in the end, you're going to be the one who gets ripped apart."

I try to ignore her words—and do a pretty good job of it for the rest of the night. But once I'm in bed, with the lights out, I can't help but think about what Macy said ... and how it feels more like an premonition than a warning.

A heaviness creeps into my bones at the thought, pushing me into the bed, weighing me down until the simple act of rolling over and curling into a protective ball feels impossible. I settle for wrapping my arms around my waist and telling myself that she's wrong. Even as a little voice inside me warns that she's not.

Why do her words feel more like an omen than a warning? A heaviness creeps into my bones and I feel myself sinking further into the bed as I wrap my arms around my waist protectively and pray she's wrong. But something tells me she's not.

Commented [ep54]: Reword, just missing end of seen foreboding hook. I tried to take a shot at her kind of gargoyle shifting miniscule-y in protection as well. lol

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Uniform Doesn't Make the Woman, But It Sure Does Bring Out the Insecurities

Pants or skirt?

I stare at my closet and all the clothes neatly lined up in it, courtesy of my cousin. ~~I've been meaning to get around to it, but with the altitude sickness and the sprained ankle yesterday afternoon, I never managed to get it done. So Macy did it for me—this morning—even though my ankle is feeling much better this morningnow. Not great, but definitely good enough to walkI know I should have done this last night-, but after a pint of Cherry Garcia and a giant plate of Nachos that followed—plus three episodes of Legacies—I didn't have the energy to do much more than lay in bed and worry.~~

About Jaxon.

About Flint.

And perhaps most terrifying, about my first day.

Which is why I am now standing here—on my first day-- with absolutely no idea of what to wear. Because I obviously worried about the wrong first day stuff ...

~~on.~~

~~Macy let me have the shower first thing, saying she wanted to get an extra hour of sleep since we stayed up late eating nachos and watching. Instead, she emptied my suitcases. Hung up all my clothes, lined my shoes up neatly on the ground, even got my pajamas and underwear in drawers. The only thing she didn't touch is the carry-on filled with my personal items, which I'm grateful for.~~

~~Still, I don't know how she did all this in twenty minutes. I know I spent extra long in the shower this morning, trying to chase away the tiredness that comes from staring at my ceiling most of the night, but still. Twenty minutes wouldn't be long enough for me to do more than open the suitcases and try to figure out where to begin.~~

~~Apparently, Macy is waaaaaay more efficient than I am.~~

~~But having all my regular clothes put away still doesn't help me with my dilemma for the day. Do the girls usually wear their uniform pants or skirts here? Or doesn't it matter? I try to remember what Macy wore yesterday, but it's all a blank besides the tropical print snow pants she wore for the snowball fight.~~

~~"Skirt," Macy says as she walks out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head.~~

~~"There are wool tights to go with it in the bottom drawer of your dresser."~~

I close my eyes in relief. Thank God for cousins.

"Awesome, thanks." I slip one of the black skirts off the hangers and step into it, then add a white blouse and black blazer before going over to my dresser for a pair of black tights.

Commented [ep55]: What? Netflix?

Commented [ep56]: Didn't she already do this that first day she arrived?

“If you wear the blouse, you’ve also got to wear the tie,” Macy tells me as she opens one of my dresser drawers and pulls out a black tie with ~~purple purple~~ and silver stripes on it.

“Seriously?” I demand, looking from her to the tie and back again.

“Seriously.” She drapes it around my neck. “Do you know how to tie one?”

“Not a clue.” I head back toward the closet. “Maybe I should go for one of the polo shirts.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll show you. It’s a lot easier than it looks.”

“If you say so.”

She grins. “I do say so.”

She starts by draping the tie unevenly around my neck and wrapping the longer end around the shorter end. A couple more wraps and a tuck and pull through—all narrated by my cousin—and I’ve got a perfectly tied tie around my neck ... even if it is a little tight.

“Looks good,” Macy says as she steps back to admire her handiwork. “I mean, the knot’s not as fancy as some of the guys wear, but it gets the job done.”

“Thanks. I’ll look up a couple videos on YouTube this afternoon, make sure I know what I’m doing before I have to tie it again tomorrow.”

“It’s pretty easy. You’ll get the hang of it in no time. In fact—” “ She breaks off at the loud knock on our door.

“Are you expecting someone?” I ask as I move toward the door, motioning for her to move back toward the bathroom as all she’s currently wearing is a towel.

“No. I usually meet my friends in the cafeteria.” Her eyes go wide. “Do you think it’s Jaxon?” She whispers his name like she’s afraid he’ll hear it through the door.

"I didn't think so, no." But now that she's planted the idea in my head...ugh. My already nervous stomach does a series of somersaults. "What do I do?" My own voice drops to a whisper without the conscious decision to do so on my part.

She looks at me like I'm ~~a moron~~ missing the obvious. "Answer the door?"

"Right." I smooth my sweaty palms down the sides of my skirt, and reach for the door handle. I have no idea what to do, what to say... although judging by how tight this stupid tie suddenly feels, I may not be able to say anything at all before it actually strangles me.

I glance back at Macy, ~~who~~ who shoots me an encouraging thumbs up ~~one~~ one last time, then take as deep a breath as I can manage before pulling the door open ~~to~~ to.

All my nerves dissipate in the space from one strangled breath to the next, largely because the person standing at our door is most ~~very~~ definitely *not* Jaxon Vega.

"Hi, Uncle Finn! How are you?"

"Hi, Gracey girl." He leans down and drops an absent-minded kiss on the top of my head. "I just stopped by to deliver your schedule." He holds a blue sheet of paper out to me. "And to wish you luck on your first day of class. You're going to do great!"

I'm not so sure about that, but I'm determined to think positive today, so I smile and say. "Thanks. I'm excited."

"Good. I made sure you got into that art class you wanted and that you got our best history teacher since that's your favorite subject. But check over your schedule, make sure you're not repeating any classes. I did my best, but mistakes happen."

He tweaks my cheek like I'm a five year old. It's such a dad thing to do ~~that~~ that my heart aches a little.

"I'm sure it's perfect," I tell him.

Macy snorts. “Don’t bet on it. If Dad did it himself instead of letting Mrs. Haversham do it, ~~no telling what he’s got you signed up for.~~” “

“Mrs. Haversham did it,” he tells her with a ~~smirkwink~~. “I just supervised. Brat.” ~~But he makes sure to go~~ He walks over and gives her a one-armed shoulder hug and the same kiss on the top of her head that he gave me.

“Ready for that math test today?” he asks.

“Been ready for a week.” She rolls her eyes.

“Good. And how’s that English project going? Did you finish—” “

“This is a boarding school,” Macy interrupts, smacking lightly at his arm. “That means parents don’t get to give their kids the third degree over every assignment.”

“That’s because they don’t know about every assignment. I, however, do. Which means I get to check up on you whenever I want.”

“Lucky me,” she deadpans.

He just grins. “Exactly.”

“Are you going to get out of here so I can get dressed? Grace and I still need to get breakfast before class. It *is* the most important meal of the day, after all.”

“Not if you waste it on cherry poparts.”

“Cherry poparts are ~~their own food group~~the best.” She glances my way. “Back me up here, Grace.”

“~~The absolute best~~Maybe two food groups, if you count the frosting.” I agree. “~~Followed closely by~~So are y—the brown sugar ones.”

“Exactly ~~what I’m talking about!~~”

It's Uncle Finn's turn to roll his eyes. But he drops another kiss on her head before heading for the door. "Do your old man a favor and grab some fruit with those pop-tarts, will you?"

"Cherries are fruit," I tease him.

"Not that way they aren't." He gives me a comforting shoulder squeeze. "Don't forget to stop by my office later. Now that you're feeling better, I want to talk to you about a few things and hear how your first day went."

"It'll be fine, Uncle Finn."

"I'm hoping it will be more than fine. But good or bad, come tell me about it. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Good. See you later, girls." He winks-smiles at us, then disappears out the door.

Macy shakes her head as she grabs her own school uniform out of the closet. "Just ignore him. My dad's a total dork."

"Most good dads are dorks, aren't they?" I ask as I move to the mirror on my closet door so I can start fixing my hair. "Besides, he reminds me of my dad. It's kind of nice."

She doesn't say anything to that, and when I glance her way, it's to find her staring sadly at me—which is, bar none, the second worst thing about losing my parents. I hate the sympathy, hate the way everyone feels sorry for me and no one knows what to say.

"That was supposed to be a happy comment," I tell her. "You don't need to feel bad."

"I know. It's just that I'm so happy you're here and we're getting this time to get to know each other. And then it hits me all over again and I feel gross for being happy." She sighs.

"Which sounds like I'm making this all about me and-but I'm really not. I just--not," because I know—

“Hey.” I break into what I’m learning could be a ~~rea~~lly, *really* long soliloquy. “I get it. And though how I got here sucks, I’m glad we have this time, too. Okay?”

A slow smile takes the place of her worried look. “Yeah, okay.”

“Good. Now get dressed. I’m starving.”

“On it!” she says, disappearing into the bathroom to do just that.

Twenty minutes later, we finally make it down the back stairs (“sooooo much less crowded,” Macy swears) to the cafeteria, after winding our way past *no less* than seven suits of armor, four giant fireplaces, and more columns than existed in all of Ancient Greece.

Okay, the last might be a slight exaggeration, but only slight. Plus, the fact that they’re black instead of white gets them extra points in my book. And that’s not even counting the gold filigree around the tops and bottom of the columns.

I mean, the whole thing is a total head trip. Seriously. Going to school in Alaska is wild enough. Going to school in an actual castle, complete with halls whose blood red ceilings are lined with blood-red painted halls gothic Lancet arches is insane. Also, hella cool.

At least if you don’t count all the people staring at me as we make our way through the halls. Macy dismisses it as “new girl stuff,” and tells me to ignore it. But it’s pretty hard to do that when people are literally turning around to stare at me when I pass. I know Macy said they’ve all been together for a long time, but come on. I can’t actually be the first new person to land here, can I? Just the idea is absurd. Schools get new kids all the time—even schools in Alaska.

Macy interrupts my inner diatribe with an excited, “We’re here!” as we stop in front of three sets of black and gold doors. The wood is carved, and I try to get a closer look at the

Commented [ep57]: Why didn’t she notice this the umpteen other times she went down these stairs? Is this another set of stairs?

Commented [TD58R58]: Added in the reason

Commented [ep59]: Does anyone know what this is? lol

Commented [TD60R60]: They do if they look them up. I knew exactly what I wanted, but had to google until I found the name of them, lolol

designs, but my cousin is in too big of a hurry to show me the cafeteria. Which... seen one, seen them all, I figure.

But as she throws open one of the doors with all the pomp and flair of a game show hostess showing me the car behind curtain number one, it's pretty obvious that I'm wrong.

Again. Because this cafeteria—and it feels wrong to even refer to the room by such a mundane name—is like nothing I have ever seen before. Ever.

I'm pretty sure it even puts the library to shame.

To begin with, the room is huge, with long walls covered in different murals of dragons and wolves and I don't know what else. Crown molding in black and gold runs around the edges of the ceiling and down the walls, framing each mural like a regular painting. The artist in me is fascinated and wants to spend hours studying each one, but I've got class in half an hour so it will have to wait. Plus, there's so much else to see here that I don't know where to look first.

The ceiling is arched and an in your face, unapologetic, blood red, overlaid with curved black molding in elaborate geometric patterns. A huge crystal chandelier hangs from the center of each pattern, casting the whole room in a soft glow that only makes its grandeur more obvious.

There are no picnic style tables here, no utilitarian trays and plastic silverware. Three long tables covered in tablecloths patterned in shades of gold and black and cream run the length of the room. They are surrounded by tufted, high backed chairs and set with real china and silverware.

Classical music floats through the room, dark and more than a little eerie. I don't know much about this kind of music, but I know creepy af when I hear it and this is definitely it.

So much so that I can't resist asking Macy, "This music is very, umm ... interesting."—"

Commented [ep61]: lol

“*Danse Macabre* by Camille Saint-Saëns. Overkill, I know, but my dad has it playing in here every year for Halloween. Along with the music from Psycho and ~~another~~ few other classics. It just hasn’t been changed over yet.”

I think about Lia, and how she said the same thing about the pillows in the library. In my old school, the Halloween spirit was pretty much exhausted by reading an Edgar Allen Poe story in English class and a costume contest on the quad at lunch. ~~Katsmere~~Katmeres Academy takes the holiday to a whole other level.

“It’s cool,” I say as we make our way along one of the tables until we find a cluster of empty seats.

“It’s ~~insane~~over the top, I know, but Halloween has always been my dad’s favorite holiday.”

“Really? That’s so weird, considering my dad hated it. I thought it must have been something that happened when he was a kid, but apparently not, if your dad goes all out for the holiday.” I asked him once, a few years ago, why he disliked Halloween so much, and he’d said he would tell me when I was older.

Turns out the universe had other plans.

“Yeah, that is weird.” Macy glances around. “But isn’t this place cool? I’ve been dying for you to see it.”

“Totally cool. I want to spend hours just looking at the murals.”

“Well, you’ve got all year, so ...” She gestures for me to sit. “What do you want to eat? Besides cherry poptarts, I mean.”

“I can come with you.”

“Next time. Right now you should get off your hurt ankle for a few minutes. Besides, I’m pretty sure today is going to be a little overwhelming. Let me help out where I can.”

“It’s pretty hard to say no to that,” I tell her, because she’s right. I’m already overwhelmed and the day has barely started. I’m also really touched by how hard Macy is working to make things easy for me. I smile my thanks at her.

~~„I smile my thanks at her and hope she gets it.~~

“So don’t say no.” She pushes me playfully toward a chair. “Just tell me what you want to eat, or I’ll bring you seal steak and eggs.”

The horror must show on my face, because she bursts out laughing. “How about a pack of cherry pop tarts and some yogurt with canned berries?”

“Canned berries?” I ask, doubtful.

“Yeah, Fiona—our chef——cans them herself when they’re in season. Fresh fruit is pretty hard to come by up here once late fall hits. The display at the party the other day was a special treat.”

“Oh, right.” I feel silly. Of course there’s no fresh berries in Alaska in November. If a pint of Ben and Jerry’s costs ten bucks, I can’t imagine what a pint of strawberries would cost. “That sounds great. Thanks.”

“No problem.” She grins at me. “Sit down and take a load off. I’ll be right back.”

I do as she directs, ~~pieking- and pick~~ a chair that faces the wall—partly because the artist in me wants to study the closest mural and partly because I’m sick of pretending I don’t see people staring at me. At least with my back turned to most of the room, I won’t be able to see them and they won’t be able to see my face.

The negative is that I also won't be able to watch for Jaxon, and I was really hoping to see him this morning. Which sounds desperate, I know, but I can't stop thinking about what he said to me before he left my dorm room last night—about how we're going to be a lot of things, just not easy.

I want to know what he meant by that, want to know if it means he feels all the crazy things I do. It's impossible to imagine that he does—I knew he was out of my league the first day I met him. But that doesn't keep me from wanting him, any more than Macy's warnings do. Or the air ~~of danger~~, of darkness; that he wears like a badge of honor... ~~or a set of shackles~~, I haven't quite figured out which.

Commented [ep62]: love

There's a part of me that wants to sneak a look behind me, just to see if I can catch a glimpse of him. But it seems way too obvious, at least with half the cafeteria ~~watching staring at~~ me. And they are ~~watchingstaring~~—I can feel their eyes even with my back turned. I know Macy says it's no big deal, that it's just new girl stuff, but it feels like more than that.

I don't have time to dwell on it, though, because Macy's ~~got~~ a fully loaded tray in her hands ~~and is heading straight for me~~.

"That looks like more than poptarts and yogurt," I tease, as I help her set it down so she won't spill anything.

"I did fine on the food, but when I got to drinks I didn't know if you wanted coffee or tea or juice or water or milk, so I brought one of each."

"Oh, wow. Umm, the juice is great."

"Oh, thank God." She holds out a glass of ~~red liquid.liquid~~. "I was afraid you were going to say you wanted the coffee and then I was going to *die*."

Commented [ep63]: which is what sort of juice? I'm racking my brain here. lol

Commented [TD64R64]: Cranberry juice

She flops dramatically into the chair across from me.

~~“I promise, t~~The coffee’s all yours,” I tell her with a laugh. ~~“And you picked the right juice—cranberry is my favorite. I promise.”~~

“Good.” She takes a long sip of the hot drink just to prove a point. “I thought all you California girls were Starbucks addicts.”

“It was always more about tea at my house. My mom was an amazing herbalist. She made her own tea blends and they were fantastic.” It’s been a month and I can still almost taste her lemon thyme verbena tea. I have a few bags of it in my carry-on, but I don’t want to drink it. And, truth be told, I’m afraid to even smell it in case I start crying and never stop.

“I can only imagine.”

There’s something in the way Macy says it that gets my attention, that has me trying to figure out what she means. I wait for her to say more, but then her eyes go wide and she starts choking on a sip of coffee.

Before I can turn around to see what’s got her so discombobulated, someone asks, “Is this seat taken?”

And then I don’t have to turn around at all. Because I’d know that voice anywhere.

Jaxon Vega just asked to sit next to me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alaska Gives a Whole New Meaning to the Cool Kids’ Table

“Umm, yeah. Sure. Of course.” As I turn to look at him, the words pour out of my mouth without any rhyme or reason, making me sound—and feel—like a ~~jerk~~total-idiot.

Jaxon inclines his head, lifts a brow. “So it *is* taken, then?”

Forget sounding like a ~~jerk~~n-idiot. I ~~am~~ an-idiot a jerk. “No! I mean, yes. I mean...” I stop, take a deep breath, and then blow it out slowly. “The seat isn’t taken. You can sit down if you’d like.”

“I *would* like.” He grabs the chair and turns it around so that when he drops down into it, he’s facing the back of the chair, one elbow draped negligently over the top.

Commented [ep65]: need a different phrase here

Commented [ep66]: Should this be more that she tells him the seat is taken, he looks around no it’s not, ugh fine no it’s empty, but I thought you didn’t like being near me, what an odd thing to say, then he just sits down?

Commented [TD67R67]: I actually think we’re past that here. I’m going to throw in her thinking that this must be what he meant about things not being easy—I know we talked about him still warning her here, but now that I’m reading again, I realize this is him warning everyone else off. He doesn’t trust Flint, doesn’t trust anyone here with her—he knows something is up after Marc and Quinn and now Flint—he just doesn’t know what. SO sitting with her, walking her to class, is his way of showing people that she’s not to be messed with. I’ll see if I can work this into a conversation with her and Macy a little later. Or maybe her and Flint so we don’t have to wait too long

Commented [ep68]: You said tehse were all huge wingback chairs, yes? No way he’s cowboying a wingback. ☺

Commented [TD69R69]: Shit, You’re right. :/

Commented [TD70R69]: Oh, they are tufted with high backs. Dining room chairs, no arms. So he can do it! Whee ☺ I don’t know why, but I am a sucker for guys who sit like that.

It's a completely ridiculous way to sit, especially on a chair this elegant...but it's also super hot. And it's pretty much been my kryptonite since Moises De la Cruz did it at a pool party when we were in seventh grade.

What can I say? I'm weak.

Guess I'm not the only weak one, though, because Macy makes another choked sound—this one worse than the last. I tear my eyes away from Jaxon long enough to make sure that sip of coffee isn't *actually* killing her. Turns out, it's not, but the fact that the other members of the Order are currently settling themselves down at the table with us just might.

"How's your ankle?" Jaxon asks, his dark gaze sliding over me in what I know is concern, but what feels a little like a caress.

"Better. Thanks for...last night."

"Which part?" The crooked grin I saw for the first time yesterday is back, and this time when he looks me over, it feels a *lot* like a caress.

But just because I'm flustered doesn't mean I'm easy a pushover. "The advice about the arsenal. Obviously."

One of the members of the Order snorts at my answer, then darts a quick look at Jaxon as he tries to smother the sound. Jaxon just kind of rolls his eyes, though, and gives a little what's up nod in his direction. Which makes the guy laugh again and has the added effect of relaxing all the other guys as well.

"Obviously." He shakes his head, looks away. But his smile doesn't fade. "So, you're planning on going to class today."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "Yeah. It's time."

He nodes like he knows what I'm talking about. "What's your first period?"

Commented [ep71]: This could be misconstrued as slut shaming. Can we reword?

Commented [TD72R72]: Oh. I meant easy to get around, not a sexual context. But I'll fix it.

Commented [TD73]: Added the nod/permission in here instead of down below

“I don’t remember.” I pull the blue schedule Uncle Finn gave me from my jacket pocket.

“Looks like Brit Lit, with Maclean.”

“I’m in that class,” says one of the other members of the Order, a guy with dark skin, ~~amberlight~~ eyes, and the hottest set of dreads I’ve ever seen. “You’ll like her. She’s cool. I’m Mekhi, by the way, and I’m happy to walk you to class if you want, show you where it is.”

Macy makes yet another choking sound—I’m beginning to think her death really is imminent—at the same time Jaxon ~~replies~~says, “Yeah, that’s going to happen.”

The other guys laugh, but I don’t get the joke. So I just kind of smile and say, “Thanks, Mekhi. I’d appreciate it, if you wouldn’t mind.”

~~That only makes them laugh harder.~~

I give Jaxon a wtf look, but he’s ~~laughing right along with~~ just kind of shaking his head at them. Then he leans in and says, “I’ll walk you to class, Grace.”

He’s so close that his breath tickles my ear, sending shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with Alaska and everything to do with the fact that I want this boy. That—despite all the warnings- ~~and bad behavior—~~ ~~I think I’m falling for this boy. I’m falling for this boy—~~ ~~hard.~~

“That would—” “My voice breaks and I have to clear my throat a couple times before I can try again. “That would be nice, too.”

“It *would* be nice.” There’s amusement in his voice, but when our eyes meet, there’s no trace of laughter in his. There’s also no trace of the coldness that’s as much a part of him as the dark hair and long, lean body. Instead, there’s a heat—an intensity—that has my hands shaking and my knees going weak.

“Should we go now?” The question is ripped from my dry throat.

Commented [ep74]: This is very contrary to how the Order is portrayed earlier. We need to show them being a little more closed off then getting a nod from Jax, as though permission, and they relax into this mood here.

Commented [TD75R75]: I see them as that way with the rest of the school, but more relaxed with Jaxon, I’ll add in something above like you mention, but I think these guys have been friends with him for most of their lives. All purebred born vampires, all powerful, they know what’s at risk. But they also know him—and care about him—the way no one else on the planet does.

Commented [ep76]: There is nothing in the book thus far to justify this? Lust? Certainly. Love? Not even remotely. This kind of a statement can only come after they’ve gotten to know each other a bit OR revealed something private that makes her think she knows him more than she does now. Otherwise, yeah, lust is all we can sell at this point. :)

Commented [TD77R77]: I don’t think this is true anymore. I’ve added to the scene outside and the one in her dorm room. It’s very obvious that she likes him now. If you don’t think that’s enough, let me know and I’ll add more during copy edits.

He looks pointedly at my tray. “You should eat now.”

“You should eat, too.” I reach for the silver package on my tray, hold it out to him.

He looks from me to the breakfast pastries and back again. “Poptarts aren’t what I’m hungry for.”

“So what *do* you want to eat?” The words are out ~~before I know that I’m going to say them, definitely~~ before I register just how suggestive they’ll sound.

This time Macy’s not the one making the choking sound. I look up, tracing it to its origin—another member of the ~~O~~order, this one ~~with~~ bronze skinned and long dark hair tied into a neat ponytail at the nape of his neck.

“Something funny, Rafael?” Jaxon asks, eyes narrowed and tone silky smooth.

~~“Absolutely not,” he answers, “Damn straight.” But~~He glances at me ~~even as he says it,~~ eyes brimming with mischief and delight. “I think I’m going to like you, Grace.”

“And here the day was going so well.”

He grins. “Yeah, definitely going to like you.”

“Don’t feel too flattered, Grace. Rafael’s not exactly the ~~most discerning guy around~~best judge of character,” says ~~one of the others, a boy~~the a guy with twinkling blue eyes and gold hoop earrings.

“Like you are, Liam?” Rafael shoots back. “The last girl you dated was a barracuda.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an insult to barracudas everywhere,” ~~chimes in another one of~~ Jaxon’s friends, his Spanish accent sexily rolling ~~the~~his rs.

“Luca knows what I’m talking about,” Rafael says.

“Because Luca’s dating history is so impressive?” Jaxon drawls, joining the conversation for the first ~~time~~.

Commented [ep78]: So the guy with the Spanish sounding name, Rafael, is not the one rolling his r’s?

Commented [TD79R79]: No, that’s Luca.

The joke is so unexpected that I can't help staring at him. Then again, everything about this morning has been unexpected—especially the dynamic between the members of the Order. Every time I've seen them, they've appeared so tough and unapproachable. So unfeeling.

But sitting here with each other—and no one but Macy and me to witness it—they're just like any other group of friends. Except funnier. And way, way hotter. ~~time~~. Knowing he's got friends like this—and that he can be a friend like this—makes me like Jaxon even more. Which is a problem considering he's blown so hot and cold that I have no idea how he feels about me.

At least not until he catches me staring and raises a questioning brow in my direction.

I just shrug at him like it's no big deal, and reach for my glass. Then nearly choke at the look in his eyes as he watches me. Because there's a craving there, a dark and devastating desperation that has my breath stuttering in my chest and heat blooming deep inside of me.

He holds my gaze for one second, two. Then he slowly blinks and when he opens his eyes again, the emptiness is back.

And still I watch him. Still, I can't look away. Because there's something just as beautiful—and just as devastating—in their emptiness as there is in their heat. Eventually though, I force myself to look down-- mostly because if I don't, I'm afraid I'll do something stupid like throw myself at Jaxon in front of the entire school.

Turning away from him, I forcibly yank my attention back to the conversation at hand, just in time to hear Luca say,

“Hey, now. How was I supposed to know Angie was a soul-sucking demon?”

“Ummm, because we told you so?” Mehki answers.

“Yeah, but I thought you were biased. You didn't like her from the start.”

“Because she was a soul-sucking demon,” Liam repeats. “What part of that are you not getting?”

“What can I say?” Luca gives a careless shrug. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Until what the heart wants tries to kill you,” Rafael teases.

“Sometimes even then.” The words are quiet, spoken from the haunted looking guy sitting to Macy’s right. ~~I don’t know his name yet, but he looks oddly familiar.~~

“Seriously, Byron?” Mekhi grouses. “Why you always got to shut the conversation down?”

“I was just making an observation.”

“Yeah, a depressing observation. You need to lighten up, man.”

Byron just stares at him, lips twisted in a tiny little smile that makes him look like a modern day embodiment of his poet namesake. ~~And that’s when it clicks. No wonder he looks so familiar to me—freshman year I went through a major Lord Byron phase.~~

Mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

The famous quote from Lady Caroline Lamb goes through my mind. But I’m not focused on Byron’s wavy black hair and dimples when I think about her words. No, in my head, they’re all about Jaxon, with his scarred face and cold eyes and smile that borders on cruel at least half the time.

Definitely bad. Definitely dangerous. As for mad—...I don’t know yet, but something tells me I’m going to find out.

When I think of him like that, I wonder what the hell I’m doing even contemplating feeling about liking him the way I do. After all, back in San Diego, dark and dangerous wasn’t

Commented [ep80]: Who is this? How many people exactly from the Order sit down?

Commented [ep81]: So, I’m loving all this banter but it’s VERY contrary to how you’ve portrayed the order up until now. Unsmiling, not talking, like they’ve got each other’s backs against everyone else, but then the alliance ends, etc. It’s okay if she got the wrong impression, but we can’t just change it entirely here. I think you need to have Rafael make the crack then Liam looks at Jaxon for permission to speak freely basically, he nods and everyone at the tables’ shoulder relax and the whole atmosphere changes. She’s noticing they totally appear one way, so serious and a unit, but she gets the sense, when they’re just them alone, they actually act very differently. To explain the total about face we’re getting right now.

Commented [TD82R82]: Yes! This is exactly what I was saying in my comment up above. I’ll add that in.

Commented [ep83]: He’s familiar to her b/c he looks like a dead poet? I don’t get it.

Commented [TD84R84]: Yeah, not great. I’ll fix it.

exactly my type. Then again, maybe that's because I never ran into the genuine article back home. Here in Alaska...well, all I'm saying is, there's a reason Macy's still swooning.

Besides, there's more to Jaxon than meets the eye. No matter how angry he is, he's never been anything but gentle with me. Even that first day, when he was so obnoxious, he still never did anything that made me uncomfortable. And he's certainly never hurt me. made sure not to hurt me. To everyone else, he might be as dangerous as Macy warns. But to me, he seems more misunderstood than malicious, more broken than bad.

Besides, Byron called it when he implied the heart wants what the heart wants, even when it's bad. And no matter how many warnings I get about Jaxon, I'm pretty sure he's what my heart wants.

Suddenly, a weird kind of chiming sound cuts through Dvorak's *The Noonday Witch* (if I'm not mistaken) that's currently playing over the cafeteria's loudspeakers. "What is that?" I ask, looking around to see if we're suddenly being invaded by a bunch of triangle playing guerillas.

"The bell," Macy says. They're the first two words she's managed to choke out since the Order took up residence next to us and all seven of us turn to her in surprise. Which just makes her smile a little sickly before shoving half a pop tart in her mouth.

"Told you you needed to eat. You didn't eat," Jaxon says. And then he picks up a huge spoon of canned berries and shoves it straight at my mouth. a pop tart and hands it to me.

I open, because the alternative is to get blackberry juice all over my white blouse, but I can't help but give him a you've got to be kidding me look.

He just grins in response and waits for me to finish chewing before shoving another bite at me.

Commented [ep85]: Why would he have to make sure not to hurt her? All they did was talk.

Commented [SA86]: Curious what Liz thinks, but this isn't really working for me. Feeding her feels a little infantilizing, not sexy. Maybe if you take out him putting his finger over her mouth earlier, this could be recast as a bit sexier and less overt? Like, "shoving a bite at her" doesn't feel sensual, it just feels weird.

Commented [SA87R87]: Also, the thought of consuming food has me wondering a bit about tying in the title "Crave" a bit more. I don't think we need to be super overt about it, but I don't really get the feeling overall of him craving her. A few instances here and there of him seeming to have a hunger in his eyes would go a long way, and maybe eating here would be a natural spot?

Commented [ep88R87]: Agree completely with all of this. Not loving him ordering her to eat OR spoonfeeding her. And I'd love to get a sense that he's craving her occasionally in his eyes. I DO like that she talks back to him next tough, so maybe just him reminding her to eat and handing her a pop tart and her being defiant back is all we need to fix this.

~~I eat the second bite too, then—out of self-preservation—jump to my feet before I even finish chewing.~~

~~“Seriously?” I demand after I finally swallow. Seriously?” I demand as I climb to my feet. “I’m pretty sure I can figure out for myself if I’m hungry or not.”~~

He shrugs. “A girl’s got to eat.”

“A *girl* can decide that for herself.”

Mekhi lets out a little whoop. “That’s right, Grace. Make sure he doesn’t walk all over you.”

Jaxon gives him a look that sends a chill right through me, but Mekhi just rolls his eyes. I notice that he *does* shut his mouth for pretty much the first time since he sat down, though. Not that I blame him. If Jaxon looked at me like that, I’m pretty sure I’d run for the hills.

“What classroom are you going to?” Jaxon asks as we maneuver our way through the suddenly bustling cafeteria. It’s easier than it should be considering the mad stampede toward the doors that is currently going on. But as long as Jaxon is in the lead, the sea of students does more than just part. It pretty much leaps out of the way.

I fumble for my schedule again, but before I can so much as pull it out, Mekhi answers, “A246,” right before he disappears into the crowd.

“Apparently, A246,” I repeat, tongue firmly in cheek.

“Apparently.” He moves slightly ahead of me to push open the door. As he holds it for me, not one person darts through. Instead they all wait patiently as I walk through and I have the fleeting thought that this is more than just popularity, more than just fear. This must be what royalty feels like.

It seems absurd to even think something so bizarre, but I make it through the door and down the hall without another body—besides Jaxon’s—coming within five feet of me. And I don’t care whether I’m in an elite boarding school in Alaska or a crowded public high school in San Diego, that is NOT normal.

I also realize that the same thing happened yesterday before the snowball fight. No matter how crowded the hall got or how much jostling went on, no one so much as touched Jaxon—or Macy and me, as long as he was standing with us.

“So, what do you do to deserve all this?” I ask as we move toward the staircase.

“Deserve all what?”

I roll my eyes at him, figuring he’s messing with me. But the blank look he gives me says otherwise. “Come on, Jaxon. Do you really not see what’s going on here?”

He glances around, clearly mystified. “What’s going on?”

Because I still can’t decide if he’s playing with me or if he really is this [denseobtuse](#), I just shake my head and say, “Never mind.” Then plow ahead and pretend that I don’t notice everyone staring at me even as they scramble to get out of my way.

So, yeah, that whole blending in plan I hatched in San Diego? Officially dead on arrival.

Chapter Twenty-Six

To Be or Not To Be is a Question, Not a Pick-Up Line

Jaxon walks me right up to my classroom door—which we get to in what I’m guessing is record time, considering there’s no one else in the room, not even the teacher.

“Are you sure this is the right ~~place~~room?” I ask as we step inside.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?” I glance at the clock. Class should start in less than three minutes and still nobody’s here. “Maybe we should check if it got—” “

“They’re waiting for me to either sit down or leave, Grace. Once one of those things happens, they’ll come in.”

“Sit down or—” “I goggle at him. “So you *were* just messing with me in the hallway? You *do* notice how people treat you?”

“I’m not blind. And even if I was, it would still be hard to miss.”

“It’s ~~madness~~eraziness!”

He nods. “It is.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say about it? If you know how crazy it is, why don’t you do something to stop it?”

“Like what?” He gives me that obnoxious smirk from the first day, the one that made me want to punch him. Or kiss him. Just the thought has my stomach spinning and has me taking a cautious step back.

He doesn’t like the added distance, at least not if his narrowed eyes can be believed. And the way he takes two steps toward me before continuing, “Stand up at the pep rally and reassure everyone that I’m not going to eat them if they get too close? Somehow I don’t think they’ll believe me.”

“Personally, I think they’re more worried about being thrown in high school jail than getting eaten—”

The smirk is back. “You might be surprised.”

“Well then, ~~So~~ you *should* reassure them. Be friendly. You know, show them that you’re harmless.”

I feel ~~silly~~ridiculous even before that left eyebrow of his goes up. “Is that what you think? That I’m *harmless*?”

Jaxon doesn’t sound insulted so much as astonished and really, I can’t blame him. Because I’ve never met anyone *less harmless* in my life. Just looking at him feels perilous. Standing next to him feels like walking a hundred foot high tightrope without a net. And wanting him the way I do...-wanting him feels like opening a vein just to watch myself bleed.

“I think you’re just as dangerous as everyone gives you credit for. I also think—”

“Yo, Jaxon, at some point class does need to start,” Mekhi interrupts as he saunters into the room—apparently the only one in this class who isn’t afraid of Jaxon. “You going to take off or are you going to keep everyone standing around watching you try to woo this girl?”

Jaxon whips his head around to glare at Mekhi, who raises his arms defensively and takes a big step back. And that’s before Jaxon’s voice drops a full octave as he growls, “I’ll leave when I’m ready.”

“I think you should probably go now,” I tell him even though I’m as reluctant to see him go as he apparently is to leave. in a voice that’s a lot less steady than it was a minute ago. “The teacher needs to start class. Besides, aren’t you the one who told me to keep my head down and not draw attention to myself?

“That was the old plan.”

Commented [ep89]: Can we not have her reaction fear-based?

“The old plan?” I stare at him, bemused. “When did we get a new plan?”

He smirks at me. “Last night. I told you it wasn’t going to be easy.”

“Wait a minute.” My stomach drops. “Are you telling the cafeteria, the walk to class ...

this was all because of *Flint*?” Just the thought makes me feel awful.

“Flint who?” he deadpans.

“Jaxon.”

“It was all because of you,” he tells me.

I’m not sure I believe him, but before I can probe anymore, he reaches out and takes hold of one of my curls. He rubs it between his fingers for a couple seconds as he watches me with those unfathomable eyes of his. “I love the way your hair smells.” Then he stretches the curl out before letting it go so it can boing back into place.

“You need to go,” I tell him again, though the words are a lot more breathless this time around.

He doesn’t look happy, and I shove my suddenly trembling hands
butterflies take up residence in my stomach at the thought that he doesn’t want to leave me yet, although it’ll get awkward if he doesn’t soon
in my blazer pockets so he won’t notice how much he affects me.
And thenbut I stare him down.

Commented [ep90]: Can we change this from a fear-based reaction to butterflies in her stomach at his obvious reticence to leave?

It takes a few seconds, but eventually Jaxon nods. He takes a step back, a grudging look on his face, and it’s only as he moves away that I realize my heart is beating like a heavy metal drummer.

“Text me a pic of your schedule,” he says as he moves toward the door.

“Why?”

“So I know where to meet you later.” His face melts into a grin, and the butterflies I always feel when he’s around in my stomach take flight in my stomach.

“I have AP Physics right now, so I’m out in the physics lab and won’t make it back before you have to go to your second period. But I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Oh. Right. Umm, okay.” My heart is back to going nuts. “Except I don’t have your number.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll text you first.” He rolls his eyes a little, but it’s an amused look not an exasperated one. Which is a good thing, because...

“But you don’t have my number, either.”

“Don’t I?”

“No. You’ve never asked—” “I break off because he’s gone again. Because of course he is. Because that’s the story of our lives. He disappears and I get disappeared on.

One of these days I’m *going* to turn the tables.

Turns out he’s right, though. As soon as he leaves, the classroom floods with people. I try to stand to the side, waiting to see where there might be an empty seat, but Mekhi nods me over to the desk next to him in the second row.

I go, even though I don’t know if a person normally sits there, because it’s really nice to have someone in this class to talk to. Especially since he’s grinning at me while everyone else is doing the same old stare and glare.

The teacher—Ms. Maclean—bustles in after everyone has taken their seat. She’s an older woman and she’s dressed in a flowing purple caftan, her wild, red hair piled atop her head in a haphazard bun that looks like it’s going to fall down at any second. She’s not young, but she’s

not old either—maybe forty or so—and she’s got a huge smile on her face as she tells everyone to open their copies of Hamlet to Act II.

Half the class has books and the other half has laptops, so I pull out my phone and start looking for a public domain copy [since I left my book in California](#). But I’ve barely typed Hamlet in the search bar before Ms. Maclean drops a dog-eared copy on my desk.

“Hello, Grace,” she murmurs in a low voice. “You can borrow one of my copies until you can find one of your own online. And since you look like the shy type—despite your association with [KatsmereKatmeres](#)’s most notorious student—I won’t make you stand up and introduce yourself to the class. But know that you’re welcome here and if you need anything, feel free to stop by my office hours. They’re posted by the door.”

“Thanks.” I duck my head as my cheeks start to get warm. Even the teachers know about Jaxon and me? Not that there is a Jaxon and me, not really. I mean— I cut the train of thought off before it can totally derail me and finish with a simple, “I appreciate it.”

“No worries.” She gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze as she heads back to the front of the room. “We’re excited to have you here.”

Mekhi leans over as I pick up the book and says, “Act two, scene two.”

“Thanks,” I mouth back, just as Ms. Maclean claps her hands.

Then, in true drama queen style, she throws her arms wide and says in [a](#) booming but perfect iambic pentameter:

“Something have you heard

Of Hamlet's transformation; so call it,

Sith nor the exterior nor the inward man

Resembles that it was.”

We spend the rest of the class discussing Hamlet's shift from perfect prince to total downer. With Ms. Maclean doing her drama thing in the front of the room and Mekhi making sly comments in my ear every couple of minutes, it's a lot more fun than it sounds. Mekhi may look intimidating, but he's way more chill than Jaxon—and also really funny. It's easy to be around him, and I end up enjoying class a lot more than I expected to.

So much so that I'm a little disappointed when the bell rings, at least until I remember that I've got art next. Art's been my favorite class pretty much since elementary school, and I'm excited to see what it's like here. But art class means heading out to the art studio and that means a detour to my room, where I can put on at least a couple more layers to protect myself from the cold.

It's only a ten minute walk to the studio, so I don't need to put on everything I did the last two times I went outside. But I do need a heavy sweatshirt and a long coat—plus gloves and a hat—if I don't have any plans to get frostbite. Which I definitely don't.

I just hope I have enough time to make it to my room and out to the art studio before the next bell rings. Just in case, I speed up a little, hoping to make it to the main staircase before the masses.

"Hey! What's your rush, New Girl?"

I glance over at Flint with a grin as he comes up on my left side. "I have a name, you know."

"Oh, right." He pretends to think. "What is it again?"

"Bite me."

"That's an interesting first name...and a phrase you might want to be careful saying around here."

“And why is that exactly?” I lift a brow at him as we weave our way through the halls. Unlike earlier with Jaxon, the whole parting of the halls thing is currently nowhere in effect. In fact, traversing the school with Flint is an awful lot like playing this old video game my dad used to like, where you have to race to get the frog across the street before one of the eight million cars going by splats him on the pavement.

In other words, it’s a normal high school hallway. I can feel myself relaxing a little more with each near collision.

“You really going to pretend you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

Flint studies me in between several near wipe outs, then shakes his head when I look back at him, brows raised in a definite WTF. “My mistake. Never mind.”

There’s something about the way he says it that has an uneasy feeling sliding through me. It’s the same feeling I got when I saw Jaxon and Lia outside without a jacket yesterday.

The same feeling I got when Flint fell out of that tree and walked away with only a few bruises.

The same feeling I got when Lia was chanting in tongues in the library, even though she had no idea what I was talking about when I mentioned several of the Alaskan languages.

“I’m not stupid, you know. I am aware that something isn’t quite right here, even if I don’t know what it is yet.”

It’s the first time I’ve acknowledged my suspicions even to myself, and it feels good to give voice to them instead of letting them fester below the surface.

“~~Are~~Do you?” Suddenly Flint is right up in my face, his whole body only inches away from mine. “~~Are~~ Do you really?”

I don't back down, despite the near desperation in his eyes. "I ~~am~~^{amde}. Now do you want to tell me what it is?"

It takes a minute, but when he next speaks the desperation is gone from his voice. And so is everything else except the teasing drawl that's as much a part of him as his green eyes and muscles. It's like the warning never happened, even before he says, "Now where's the fun in that?"

"You've got an odd definition of fun."

"You have no idea." He wiggles his brows. "So what are you up to, anyway?"

I stare at him. "Do you ever finish any conversation without starting another?"

"Never. It's part of my charm."

"Yeah, just keep telling yourself that."

"I will." He walks several more feet with me, happily bopping along to a song that's only in his head. "Where are you going? The classrooms are back that way."

"I've got to go to my room and grab some warmer clothes. I have art next, and I'll freeze if I go outside like this."

"Wait." He stops dead. "No one told you about the tunnels?"

"What tunnels?" I eye him suspiciously. "Are you messing with me again?"

"I'm not, I swear. There's a whole network of tunnels that run under the school and lead to the different outbuildings."

"Seriously? This is Alaska—how did they dig tunnels in the frozen ground?"

"I don't know. How do they drill in the frozen ground? Besides summer is a thing." He gives me the best Boy Scout look in his repertoire. "I promise. The tunnels are real. I just can't believe the omnipotent Jaxon Vega forgot to mention them to you."

“Are you kidding me Seriously?” You’re going to start in on Jaxon now?”

“Of course not. I’m just saying, I’m the one telling you about the tunnels and keeping you from freezing off all the important parts of your anatomy. He could have mentioned them to you before sending you out into the cruel, cruel winter.”

“It’s fall.” “I roll my eyes. “And are we going to do this every time we talk about Jaxon?”

He holds his hands up in mock innocence. “As far as I’m concerned, we *never* have to talk about Jaxon.”

“Funny claim coming from a guy who keeps bringing him up.”

“Because I’m worried about you. I swear.” He draws an X over his heart. “Jaxon’s a complicated guy, Grace. You should stay away from him.”

“I find it interesting that he says the exact same thing about you.”

“Yeah, well, nothing says you have to listen to him.” He makes a disgusted face.

“Nothing says I have to listen to you either.” I give him a shit eating grin. “You see my conundrum, right?”

“Oooh. The new girl’s got some claws, after all. I like it.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re a total weirdo. You know that, right?”

“Know it? I own it, baby.”

I can’t help but laugh as he makes a ridiculous face at me, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue. “So, are you going to show me these tunnels sometime this year or am I going to have to do my best impression of the abominable snowwoman?”

“Definitely the tunnels. Turns out I’m headed that way myself. Come on.”

He reaches for my hand and makes an abrupt left turn, tugging me down a narrow corridor that I don’t think I would have even noticed if he hadn’t dragged me into it.

It's long and winding and slopes down so gradually that it takes me a minute to notice we're descending. Flint keeps a firm grip on my hand as we pass a couple of students coming the other way.

The hallway is so narrow that all four of us have to press our backs up against the wall to keep from crashing into each other as we pass.

"How much further is it?" I ask as we get back to walking normally. Or at least as normally as we can walk as the ceiling starts to get lower as well. If this keeps up, we're going to be duck walking through this thing like they had to do in the pyramids.

"Just another minute to the tunnel entrance, and then a five minute walk to the art studio."

"Ok, cool." I pull out my phone to check how we are on time—seven minutes—and see that Jaxon wasn't kidding when he said he had my number. I've got two texts from him, one telling me that it's him that came in halfway through English class and another one that came a couple minutes ago that's nothing but a string of question marks.

I text him back a laughing emoji and a copy of my schedule—not because he demanded one earlier, but because I want to see if he'll follow through and find me again. Once the texts go through, I shove my phone back in my pocket and try to tell myself that I don't care that much if he shows up or not. But it's a lie and I am very well aware of that fact.

The light is getting dimmer and dimmer the further we go down this corridor and if I was with anyone but Flint (or Jaxon or Macy) I'd be getting nervous. Not because I think there's anything wrong necessarily, but because I can't help wondering if the walkway to the tunnels is this creepy, what are the actual tunnels going to look like?

"Okay, here we go," Flint finally says as we come up against an old wooden door—one that's protected by an electronic keypad that has my eyebrows lifting to my hairline. Nothing in

Commented [ep91]: That seems super far, considering how far they've already walked.

Commented [TD92R92]: I changed it to a ten minute walk to the art studio to make this seem more reasonable

my life has ever looked as incongruous as that keypad in the middle of this musty, dusty corridor with a door that looks to be at least a hundred years old.

He punches in a five digit code so fast that I don't see any number past the first three. It takes a second, but then the light above the door flashes green at the same time the door unlocks.

Flint glances over his shoulder at me as he reaches to pull the door open. "You ready?"

"Yeah, of course." Another glance at my phone tells me we better hustle or I'm going to be late.

Flint holds the door for me and I smile my thanks at him, but the second I take a step over the threshold, a little voice deep inside of me starts screeching—telling me to not to go any further.

Telling me to run.

Telling me to get the hell away from these tunnels and never look back.

But Flint's waiting for me to go. Plus, if I don't get moving, I'm going to be seriously late to art. Definitely not the first impression I wanted to make on the teacher of my favorite class.

Besides, this is Flint. The guy who jumped out of a tree and took the brunt of a very nasty fall just to save me. It's crazy to think that I might have to run from *him* of all people, not matter what Jaxon says.

Which is why I shove all the new and bizarre misgivings I'm suddenly having back down where they belong. And walk straight across the threshold.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Forget Stairway to Heaven, Think Escalator to Hell

Flint follows me through, then lets the door close behind us with a solid thump.

The room is dim, even dimmer than the passageway here, and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. But once they do, I have an overwhelming urge to go back the way we came.

“What is this place?” I demand. “It doesn’t look like a tunnel.”

In fact, what it looks like, is a prison. Or at least the holding area of a jail. There are several cells, lining the wall in front of us, each one equipped with a bed—and, more importantly, two sets of shackles. Castle or not, Alaska or not, I am NOT okay with what I’m seeing. At all.

“I think we should go back,” I tell him, pulling at the door handle to no avail. “How do I get this door open?” There’s no keypad on this side, nothing that I can see that will get us out of here.

“You have to open it from the other side of this room,” Flint tells me, looking amused. “Don’t worry. We’ll be through here in a second.”

“I thought we were going to the tunnels. I’ve got to get to art, Flint.”

“This *is* the way to the tunnels. Chill, Grace.”

“What tunnels? This is a dungeon!” Alarm is racing through me at this point, my brain warning me that I don’t know this guy that well. That anything can happen down here. That—I take a deep breath, try to shut down the panic tearing through me.

“Trust me.” He puts a hand on my lower back, starts guiding me forward. I don’t want to go, but at this point, it’s not exactly like I’ve got a dozen alternatives. I can pound on the door, hoping that someone hears me, or I can trust Flint to do what he says and get me to the tunnel I need. Considering he’s been nothing but kind to me since I got here, I let him propel me forward and pray I’m not making a mistake.

We walk all the way to the end of the room, past four separate cells, and I don’t say a word of complaint. But when Flint stops in front of the fifth cell and tries to get me to go in, my trust and patience come to an abrupt end.

“What are you doing?” I demand. Or screech, depending on your point of view. “I’m not going in there.”

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “It’s where the entrance to the tunnels is.”

“I don’t see an entrance,” I snap at him. “All I see are bars. And shackles.”

“It’s not what it looks like, I swear. These are secret tunnels and when they built the castle a hundred years ago, they did a really good job of disguising the entrance.”

“A little too good a job, in my opinion. I want to go back up, Flint. I’ll make up some excuse for my art teacher for being late, but I—”

“It’s okay, Grace.” For the first time he looks concerned. “We use these tunnels all the time. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Yeah, but—” I break off as the door at the other end of the room opens. And in walks Lia.

“Hey, hold the door!” I call to her, slipping out of Flint’s loose hold and making a mad dash back toward the only obvious exit point in this hellhole of a room.

But ~~she’s bopping along to some song in her head and she obviously~~ doesn’t hear me. The door slams shut behind her. Damn it.

Commented [ep93]: This is how you described Flint earlier.

“Grace!” She looks surprised to see me as she fishes a pair of earbuds out of her ears.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m taking her to the tunnels.” Flint shoots me an exasperated look as he catches up to me. “She’s got art.”

“Oh, yeah? With Kaufman?” Lia looks interested.

“Yeah.”

“Cool. Me too.” She gives Flint a cool glance. “I’ll take it from here.”

“No need for that,” he answers. “I’m going that way, too.”

“You don’t have to bother.”

“No bother. Right, Grace?” He grins at me, but this time he sure seems to be showing a lot of teeth.

Then again, who can blame him? He was trying to help me, and I freaked out on him for no reason. “If you’re sure.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” He loops an arm through mine. “I would love to escort you ladies to class.”

“Lucky us.” Lia’s own smile is saccharin sweet as she takes hold of my other arm and starts to walk us back toward the end of the room. As we move—both of them holding on to me—I can’t help but feel a little like a ping pong ball caught between ~~them, hem. Or, more accurately, the rope in a tug-of-war, though I don’t know why.~~

Lia doesn’t let go until we reach the final cell. She marches inside and grabs hold of one of the arm shackles—exactly as Flint was aiming to do when I freaked out—and then pulls, hard.

The portion of the stone wall the shackles are attached to opens wide. She glances back at us, eyebrows raised. “Ready?”

Flint looks at me, tilts his head questioningly.

I feel myself blushing yet again, this time out of shame. “Sorry. I freaked out when I shouldn’t have.”

He shrugs. “No worries. I guess I come down here so often I forget how creepy it looks.”

“So creepy,” I tell him as we move into the cell. “And when you reached for that shackle—”

He laughs. “You didn’t really think I was going to chain you up down here, did you?”

“Of course she did,” Lia tells him as we walk through the trick door and she pulls it close behind us. “I wouldn’t trust you either. You look like exactly that kind of pervert.”

“And what kind of pervert is that?” he demands, looking between the two of us.

Suddenly I remember what Macy said about Jaxon when she was trying to warn me off him and I can’t resist. “You know, the kind who starves a girl so he can make a dress out of her skin.”

They both stare at me like I’ve lost my mind completely ~~completely insane~~. Lia looks a little appalled and Flint... Flint looks more offended than anyone *ever*. It’s totally inappropriate, but I can’t help laughing. Because, come on. Who hasn’t seen that movie—or at least heard about it?

“Excuse me?” he says after a second, more ice in those words than in the entire school grounds outside.

“From *Silence of the Lambs*? That’s what the serial killer Jodie Foster is trying to catch does to his victims? It’s why she needs Hannibal Lecter—”

“Never saw the movie.”

“Oh, well, he would kidnap girls and—”

“Yeah, I got it.” He lets go of my arm for the first time since Lia showed up. “For the record, clothes made of skin, not so much my style.”

“Obviously. That’s why I made the joke.” When he doesn’t respond, I bump my shoulder against his. “Come on, Flint. Don’t be mad. I was just playing.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Lia tells me as we make our way further into the tunnels.

“He’s a total drag—”

“Bite me,” Flint growls.

She eyes him scornfully. “You wish.”

“I wish you’d try.” He returns her look with interest.

Wow, this devolved quickly.

“~~DO~~Okay, don’t we need to get to class?” I ask, determined to interrupt whatever this is before it ~~gets even worse~~devolves even further. “The bell’s going to ring in a minute.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lia tells me. “Kaufman knows it’s a pain to get to her class, so she doesn’t sweat it.”

But she does pick up the pace—after giving Flint one last look that’s a cross between a snarl and a smirk.

I follow her, leaving Flint to bring up the rear as I figure we’ll all do better with me as a buffer between them. For the first time since last night, when Macy tried to explain that I can’t be friends with both Jaxon *and* Flint, I actually start to believe her. Lia’s obviously Team Jaxon and look how well this little excursion is going.

We’re moving fast through the tunnels now, so I don’t get to check them out the way I really want to. Still, the recessed lighting—dim as it might be—gives me at least a decent view of where I’m walking. And I have to say, terrifying entrance notwithstanding, these things are freaking cool!

The walls are made entirely of different colored stones—mostly white and black, but there are colored stones too. They gleam red and blue and green even in the dim light, and I can’t help reaching out to touch one of the bigger ones, just to see what it feels like. Cool, obviously, but also smooth, polished, like a gemstone. For a second—just a second—I wonder if that’s what they are. But then I dismiss it as ridiculous, because what school (even a fancy, rich one like ~~Katsmere~~Katmeres Academy) has the money to embed gemstones in the walls?

The floor is made of white brick, as are a bunch of the columns we pass as we walk. But what really gets me is the art that is down here—bone-like sculptures embedded in the walls, hanging from the ceiling, even resting on pedestals in various alcoves along the way.

It's an obvious homage to the Paris catacombs, where seven million skeletons are laid to rest—or used for macabre decorations throughout—and I can't help wondering if the school's art classes added the "bone" sculptures to the tunnels here. I also want to know what art supplies the bones are really made of.

But trying to figure that out has to wait, too, if I have any hope of making it to art class even close to on time.

As we follow the tunnel, we get to a kind of rotunda type room that pretty much has my eyes bugging out of my head. It's obviously a main hub for the tunnels, because eleven other tunnels feed into it as well. But that's not what has my eyes going wide, even though I have no idea which of the ~~eleven~~ other tunnels we should take.

No, what has my mouth falling open and my eyes pretty much bugging out of my head, is the giant chandelier hanging in the center of the room, unlit candles at the end of each arm. But it's not the size of the chandelier or the fact that there are actual candles in it that catches my attention—although, fire code, anyone? It's the fact that the chandelier, like so many of the other decorations down here, looks to be made entirely of human bones.

I know it's just art, and the bones are made of plastic or whatever, but they sure look realistic hanging off the chandelier—so much so that a chill creeps down my spine. This is more than an homage to the catacombs. It's like someone actually tried to recreate them.

"Why are you stopping?" Flint asks, but then he follows my gaze. "Oh, yeah. I'm down here so often I forget what it looks like to people who have never seen it."

“This is ~~bizarre~~~~insane~~. You know that, right?”

He grins. “A little bit. But it’s also cool, right?”

“Totally cool.” I step further into the room to get a better look. “I wonder how long it took. I mean, it had to be a class art project, right? Not just one student.”

“Art project?” Flint looks confused.

“We don’t know,” Lia interjects. “It was done years before we got here—years before your uncle or any of the other current teachers got here, too. But yeah, it had to be a class project. No way one artist could do all this in a semester, or even a year.”

“It’s amazing. I mean, so elaborate and life-like. I mean-...-you know what I mean.”

She nods. “Yeah.”

There ~~are’s~~ more bones above each of the tunnels, as well as plaques bearing inscriptions in a ~~a~~ language I don’t recognize. One of the Alaskan languages, I’m sure, but I want to know which one. So I take out my camera and snap a pic of the closest plaque, figuring I’ll ~~g~~Google it ~~along with the cottage names, later tonight.~~

“We need to go,” Flint says as I start to take a second pic. “Class is starting.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” I glance around as I shove my phone back in my blazer pocket.

“Which tunnel are we taking?”

“The third one to the left,” Lia says.

We head that way, but just as we’re about to reach it, a low-grade tremor rips through the room. At first, I think I’m imagining it, but as the bones in the chandelier start to clink together in the eeriest sound imaginable, I realize there’s nothing imaginary about it.

We’re standing in the middle of a musty, crumbling old tunnel ~~just~~ as an earthquake hits.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

With Friends Like This, Who Needs A Hardhat?

Lia's eyes go wide as the chandelier sways above us. "We need to get out of this room."

"We need to get out of these tunnels!" I answer. "How sturdy do you think they are?"

“They won’t collapse,” she assures me, but she starts moving toward the tunnel that’s supposed to lead to the art studio pretty damn quickly.

Not that I blame her— Flint and I are moving fast, too.

It’s not a big earthquake, at least not the kind that Alaska is known for. But it’s not like the small tremors that I’ve felt since coming here either. Based on what I’ve experienced back home, t~~This one is an easy seven on the Richter scale—a definite quake.~~

Lia and Flint must realize that at the same time I do because once we hit the new tunnel, our fast walk becomes a run.

“How far to the exit?” I demand. My phone is vibrating in my pocket, a series of texts coming in fast and furious. I ignore them as ground continues to move.

~~“Maybe a~~Another couple hundred yards,” Flint ~~tells me, says, glancing down at my~~ pocket. ~~“You should answer those.”~~

“Are we going to make it?”

“Absolutely. We--”

“Right now?”

~~“Yeah—”~~ “Suddenly, He breaks off as a there’s a loud rumbling sound comesing from the ground, followed closely by a violent shift that turns the quake from rolling to shaking.

My legs turn to rubber, and I start to stumble. Flint grabs me above the elbow to steady me, then uses his grip to propel me through the tunnel so fast that I’m not sure my feet are even touching the ground anymore. Unlike on the stairs, a few days ago, this time I’m not complaining.

Lia's in front of us, running even more quickly, though I don't know how that's possible considering just how fast Flint has us moving.. uses his other hand to reach into my pocket and thrust my phone into my hands. "Answer him."

"Who?"

He doesn't say, just stands there waiting—and holding me up—as I unlock my phone. There are six messages from Jaxon.

Jaxon: Hey, thought I'd catch you at art but you aren't here.

Jaxon: ???

Jaxon: You okay?

Jaxon: Luka says he saw you with Flint. You good?

Jaxon: Hey, where are you? I know you can make your own decisions. Just want to be sure you're okay.

Jaxon: Not getting worried over here. But Answer me, Grace. Are you all right?

Jaxon: Look, this school isn't always safe. I'm worried you're ok. Give me a heads up?

"Are you guys coming?" Lia demands from several yards ahead of us.

"Yes!" I type back a quick response:

-Grace: I'm fine. Trying to get out of the tunnels but the quake makes it hard.

Then I shove the phone in my pocket and take off after Lia.

By the time I get to her, the quake has stopped. Finally. We book it through the tunnels, just in case it starts again. My heart is still pounding furiously, but I can tell that Lia and Flint think the danger has passed. Which seems insanericulous, considering one of the first thing you

Commented [SA94]: This looks to be one of those instances the publicist pointed out where he's getting angry with her for not answering his texts quickly enough. He can be worried without seeming stalkery.

Commented [ep95]: Trying to lessen this from stalkery to just he's worried about her, not upset she's not answering him just bc he texted.

learn in California is that aftershocks can happen for days after a quake and sometimes be just as bad as the quake itself.

Finally, the ground starts to slant upward and relief sweeps through me. We're almost there, almost out of this place and—so far—the tunnels have held. The ground finally starts slanting upward and relief sweeps through me. We're almost out of this place. Twenty more seconds and a door looms ahead of us. Unlike the one we originally came through, this one is covered in drawings of dragons and wolves and witches and what I am pretty sure is a vampire on a snowboard.

It's all done in graffiti style, using every color imaginable. And it is totally badass. Another day—when I haven't just when the earth isn't literally moving under my feet survived an earthquake in a century-old tunnel—I'll stop to admire the artwork. For now, I wait for Lia to punch in the code—59678 (I watch carefully this time)—and then the three of us burst through the door and into what is obviously a very large art supply closet.

The earthquake stops just as the door closes behind us. I exhale in relief as Flint drops my arm, then bend over and try to catch my breath. He might have been doing most of the work to get us here, but I was moving my legs as fast as I could.

Several seconds pass before I can breathe without feeling like my lungs are going to explode. When I can, I stand back up—and notice a few things all. As the door closes behind us, I notice three things at the same time. One, this closet is really well stocked. Two, the door into the art classroom is wide open. And three, Jaxon is standing in the doorway, face wiped completely blank of expression.

My stomach clenches at my first glimpse of his clenched fists and the wild fury burning in the depths of his eyes—not because I'm afraid, but because it's obvious that he was.

once. One, the light is really bright. Two, the closet is really well stocked. And three, ~~Jaxon is standing in the middle of the room,~~ hands clenched into fists and face set in murderous lines.

Commented [ep96]: In the middle of a closet?

For long seconds, no one says ~~or does~~ anything. And then Lia tells him, “Don’t worry, Jaxon darling, I’m fine.” She ~~pats him on his unscarred cheek~~ ~~blows him a kiss~~ as she walks right by him into ~~what I can only assume is~~ the art classroom ~~and closes the door behind her.~~

He doesn’t even glance her way. ~~His,~~ his eyes—flat and black—~~are~~ pinned to Flint. Who rolls his own eyes as he says, “They’re both fine. ~~You’re welcome.~~ ~~No thanks to you.~~”

~~He doesn’t move, doesn’t say anything—~~For long seconds, Jaxon doesn’t respond. He doesn’t ~~even~~ make a sound. But it turns out I only thought Jaxon was pissed before. Because after Flint’s comment, he looks like he’s one very small step away from an aneurysm. Or mass murder.

“Get out of here,” he growls.

“I wasn’t planning on sticking around.” Flint doesn’t move, though. Instead, he stays where he is—in front of me—~~staring~~ Jaxon down.

And that’s it. That’s just it. “Move,” I order, and when Flint doesn’t move fast enough, I shove past him.

For a second, it looks like he’s going to stop me, but a low snarl from Jaxon has him stepping back. Which only pisses me off more. ~~I get that he was afraid for me, but that doesn’t give him the right to act like a psychopath.~~

“Are you really okay?” Jaxon ~~demands~~ ~~asks~~ as I step forward.

~~“I’m fine.”~~ I try to shove past him, too, but unlike Flint, Jaxon doesn’t move. He just stands there, in my way, eyes dark and ~~still filled with anger~~ ~~...and~~ something I can’t quite put

my finger on as he stares down at me. Whatever ~~the lookit~~ is, it makes me feel all fizzy inside—like a ~~carbonated drink that's been shaken way too much.~~ ~~bottle of shaken-up Topo Chico.~~ Or it would, if I let it. Right now, I'm too busy concentrating on the mad to get sidetracked by the rest of it.

"I tell you to stay away from Flint, so you go into the tunnels with him?" he demands.

It's the way wrong thing to say to me right now, when adrenaline is still coursing through me from the quake. And the run. And the terror. But just because I was scared out of my mind a few minutes ago doesn't mean I'm going to put up with Jaxon demanding anything from me. Any more than I'm going to put up with him telling me what to do.

"I'm not talking to you about this right now," I answer. "I'm late for a class that I really didn't want to be late for and the last thing I have time for is all this bizarre posturing from the two of you." I include Flint in my anger.

"There's no posturing, Grace." He reaches for me, but I yank my hand away before he can take hold of it.

"Whatever you want to call it. It's boring and annoying and I'm over it. So get out of my way and let me get to class before I forget I'm a pacifist and punch you in the face."

I'm not sure which word shocks him more—the punch or the pacifist. Before either of us can figure it out, though, Flint jumps in with a, "You go, Grace. Tell him to back the fuck off."

This time Jaxon's snarl is terrifying as fuck. It's also loud enough to have the class on the other side of this closet going completely silent—even the teacher. Which, terrific. Just freaking terrific.

I whirl on Flint. "You shut up or I'll think of something really terrible to do to you." I turn back to Jaxon. "As for you, get the hell out of my way or I'm never talking to you again."

At first, ~~For long seconds~~, Jaxon doesn't move. But I think that has more to do with complete and utter astonishment (if his face is anything to go by) rather than a deliberate attempt to push back at me.

In the end, though, he lifts his hands and steps out of my way, exactly as I'd demanded.

"Thank you," I tell him, much more quietly. "And I appreciate your concern. I really do. But this is my first day of class-school and I just want to go to class."

And then, without waiting for him to answer, I sweep past him and into a classroom ~~art~~ class where everyone—even Lia and the teacher—are staring at me.

Big. Freaking. Surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Big Girls Don't Cry (Unless They Want To)

“Grace! Look out!”

I turn toward my cousin's voice—the first girl to speak to me since I went off on Jaxon and Flint five hours ago— just in time to see a basketball flying toward my head. I swat it away, then press my lips together to keep from crying out as pain radiates up my hand.

It's ridiculous that the act of deflecting a basketball could hurt this much, ~~me~~, but whoever threw it, threw it hard. My whole arm aches from the jolt of coming in contact with it, and I didn't even know that was possible.

“What the hell?” Macy asks the gym at large as she jogs over to me. “Who threw that?”

No one answers.

“Seriously?” My cousin puts her hands on her hips and glares at a group of girls standing by the locker room door. “Did you do this?”

“Don't worry about it,” I tell her. “It doesn't matter.”

“Doesn't matter? I heard how hard that ball hit your hand. If it had gotten your head, you could have had a concussion!”

“But it didn't. And I'm fine.” It's a bit of a stretch considering I'm still in pain, but I've made a big enough spectacle of myself today, thank you very much. No way am I going to start whining about a few mean girls.

Or a lot of mean girls, for that matter, one of whom apparently has a future in professional basketball.

I mean, yeah, I'm not denying it's been a crazy day. I haven't seen Jaxon or Flint since I went off on them this morning. But even though Jaxon hasn't shown up at anymore of my classes, ~~but~~ Byron was waiting outside my art class with a parka when it let out—so I wouldn't have to go through the spooky as hell tunnels again, thank God. Rafael sat with Macy and me at lunch plus walked us to AP Spanish, the one class we share. And Liam walked me from Spanish to P.E.

None of which went unnoticed by the other students and none of which has exactly worked in my favor. I mean, I wasn't looking to make a bunch of friends here, but I also don't want to have to dodge flying basketballs every second of the day either.

"You sure you're okay?" Macy asks, frowning at the way I'm wiggling my fingers and shaking my hand.

I stop immediately. "I am sure. I'm fine." The last thing I want is for Macy to make a big deal out of something that could have ~~happened, but didn't~~ been a lot worse.

Commented [ep97]: But it did happen, the basketball still hit her

She shakes her head, but doesn't say anything else about the basketball. And if I catch her glaring at some of my classmates, I'm not going to call her out on it. I'd be pissed if someone was messing with her, too.

Still, it's past time to change the subject, so I ask, "What's all this?" gesturing to the black leotard, tights, and sequined skirt she's wearing.

"Dance team," she answers with a proud little grin. "I've got one of the solos at Friday's pep rally."

“Seriously? That’s amazing!” I squeal, even though I’ve never been a big dance team enthusiast. But Macy obviously loves it and that’s enough for me.

“Yeah. I’m dancing to—”[”] She breaks off as the coach blows a whistle.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“It means the period’s over. And since this is the last one, it also means you’re free.”

Macy grins. “I’ve got practice for two hours after school, but I’ll find you when I’m done and we can go to dinner together. If there’s not another earthquake, that is.”

“Right?” There have been several more tremors this afternoon—nothing big, just aftershocks, but they’ve definitely set most of the students—me included—on edge. “Who knew I’d experience more earthquakes in four days at the center of Alaska than I did my whole life living on the coast in California?”

“It’s weird,” she agrees, looking baffled. “Sure, we have a quake every once in a while, but we haven’t had this many in a row in a long time. Maybe ever. You must have brought them with you.”

“Sorry about that,” I joke. “I’ll try to tone it down.”

“You do that,” she answers with a grin. “See you after practice.”

“See you.”

“Sounds good,” I agree before heading I shoot her a little wave before heading back toward the locker room. No one bothers me as I change~~get dressed~~, but no one talks to me either. And I gave up trying to talk to people somewhere around lunchtime. It only takes so many cold shoulders before I get the message.

~~Besides, being in the locker room with these girls is crazy intimidating. I mean, just being on the same planet with them is rough, considering how perfect they are. Stripping down to my bra and underwear next to them is even harder. Not for the first time, I seriously consider the whole aliens walking among us theory.~~

Commented [ep98]: Again, I think we should temper this.

I get dressed in record time, then grab my backpack and head out. I probably should go back to my room and get started on my homework, but I'm not used to being cooped up in one room all the time. Back home, I was always outside—in the pool, at the beach, running through the park. I even did my homework on the front porch swing, watching the sun set over the water. Going from that to being stuck inside almost all the time is more than a little rough.

I think about going back to the room and changing into all those outdoor clothes so I can go for a walk. But nothing about me is particularly thrilled at the idea of putting on half my closet just to brave the ~~sub-freezingzero~~ temperatures, either, so in the end I decide on a compromise. I'll wander around the castle, getting to know it better since there are huge portions I haven't set foot in yet, even with my classes taking me all over the place today.

Commented [ep99]: It was only 12 degrees two days ago. It dropped to sub zero that fast?

For a second, Jaxon's warning from the first night flits through my head, but that was for late at night. Just because the sun outside the castle has been down a couple of hours already doesn't mean the halls aren't safe now, while everyone is awake and going from one activity to another. Also, I'm not going to spend the next year and a half afraid of the people I go to school with. Those guys the other night were jerks, no doubt about it, but they caught me unprepared. No way am I going to let it happen again. And no way am I going to become a prisoner in my own school.

Thoughts of Jaxon have me pulling out my phone and opening my message app. There are five text messages waiting for me from Jaxon—all sent during the earthquake. I haven't

opened them yet because at first I was too mad to want to know what he had to say. Then I didn't want to be around anyone when I opened them. I tend to wear my emotions on my sleeve and the last thing I want is for someone watching me to see how I feel about Jaxon—especially when I currently have no idea what, if anything, is going to happen between us.

The first message came in a few minutes after Brit Lit got out.

Jaxon: Hey, thought I'd catch you at art, but you aren't here. Are you lost? ;)

A few more minutes pass before the second message came in.

Jaxon: Need a search and rescue? o_O

The third message comes in pretty fast after the second one, followed in quick succession by the next three.

Jaxon: Sorry to bug you, just want to make sure you aren't in any trouble.

Jaxon: Hey, you okay?

Jaxon: Getting worried over here. Just looking for a heads up. You good?

Jaxon: Grace?

I remember them coming in during the earthquake and not paying any attention to them. But now that I've read them, I feel like a total jerk. Not for not answering them right away, because—earthquake! But for laying into him the way I did in the art studio. I was just thinking about how embarrassed I was that he was there, arguing with Flint and making a spectacle of me. I didn't think about the fact that he was there because he was worried about me and that he the fight with Flint happened because he was so on edge.

In my old school, it would be absurd—and probably even a little freaky—to have a guy get so worried about me. But I can't really blame Jaxon for being legitimately concerned, not when he's already had to rescue me twice. And not when his last texts came in the middle of a

freaking earthquake, which got people so worked up that every teacher I had for the rest of the day took ten minutes out of class time to go over earthquake safety.

If everyone else is freaked out by the quake, it's hard to be upset at Jaxon for feeling the same way.

Because I feel bad for making him wait so long for a response, I fire off a couple of texts in quick succession.

Me: Sorry, been busy and haven't checked my phone

Me: You busy? Want to explore the castle with me?

When he doesn't answer right away, I shove my phone in my blazer pocket and wander into one of the side hallways with no real destination in mind for my exploration.

~~—— It's that thought that has me wandering out of the main hallways with no real destination in mind.~~ I pass a room where two people are fencing, complete with white uniforms and head masks, and pause to watch for a little while. Then I wander down to the music hall, where a curly-haired boy is playing the saxophone. I recognize the tune as "Autumn Leaves" and just the sound of it nearly brings me to my knees.

Cannonball Adderley cut an album in 1958 called *Something Else*. Miles Davis and Art Blakely played on it and it was my father's favorite—especially the song, "Autumn Leaves." He used to play it over and over when he was working around the house, and made me listen to it with him at least a hundred times, where he went over every single note, explaining over and over how and why Adderley was such a genius.

Commented [ep100]: No idea what this is.

Commented [TD101R101]: It's just a jazz piece that I love

The last month since my parents died is probably the longest I've gone without hearing that song in my entire life and to run across it here, now, feels like a sign. Not to mention a punch to the gut.

Tears flood my eyes and all I can think about is getting away. I turn and run, not caring where I'm going, knowing only that I need to escape.

I take the back stairs, running ~~up and up and up, and running,~~ until I ~~end up arrive at in an alcove in the~~ highest tower. Most of the tower is taken up by whatever room lies behind the closed door, but there's a tiny alcove right off the stairs ~~with a~~ There's a huge window—the first one in the castle that I've actually seen with the curtains open—that looks out over the front of the school. It's dark out right now, but the view is still gorgeous—the snow lit up by lampposts and the midnight blue sky filled with stars as far as the eye can see.

The room itself has built in bookshelves that go all the way around it and a couple of comfy, overstuffed chairs to lounge in. It's obviously a reading nook—everything from the classics to modern day Stephen King fill up the shelves—but I'm not here to read, no matter how much I usually love it.

Instead, I sink down on one of the chairs and finally, finally, let the tears come.

There are a lot of them—I ~~haven't cried, really cried, since the funeral,~~ and now that I've started I'm not sure I'll ever stop. Grief is a wild thing within me, a rabid animal tearing at my insides and making everything hurt.

I'm trying to be quiet—the last thing I want is to draw more attention to myself—but it's hard when it hurts this much. In self-defense, I wrap my arms around myself and start to rock, desperate to ease the pain. Even more desperate to find a way to hold myself together when everything inside of me feels like it's falling apart.

Commented [ep102]: But you said earlier she cries every night in the shower. Maybe she hasn't cried since arriving at the school and getting snubbed by literally everyone and it all just hits her now?

Commented [TD103R103]: I was thinking a few tears in bed versus a full on hysterical cry. I can go back and change that.

It doesn't work. Nothing does, and the tears just keep coming, as do the harsh, wrenching sobs tearing themselves from my chest.

I don't know how long I stay here, battling the pain and loneliness that comes from losing my parents in the blink of an eye and then everything familiar in my life less than a month later, but it's long enough for the sky to turn from the dark blue of civil twilight to pitch black.

Long enough for my chest to hurt.

More than long enough for the tears to run dry.

Somehow, running out of tears only makes everything hurt worse.

But sitting here isn't going to change that. Nothing is, which means I might as well get up. Macy should be done with dance practice soon and the last thing I want is for her to come looking for me.

Having her see me like this—having *anyone* see me like this—is the threat that finally galvanizes me. Except when I climb to my feet and turn around, it's to find that someone already has.

Jaxon.

Chapter Thirty

It's Not a Coincidence that Denali and Denial Use All the Same Letters

Jaxon's standing at the head of the stairs, face blank but eyes searching, as he stares at me.

Embarrassment slams through me, makes my face hot and my breath stutter. I start to ask him how long he's been there, but it doesn't really matter. He's been there long enough.

I wait for him to say something, to ask if I'm okay again or to tell me to stop whining or say one of the million and three things that fall somewhere in between those two reactions. He doesn't, though. Instead he just stands there, watching me with those black magic eyes of his until I lose my breath again ... this time for a whole different reason.

"I'm—I'm sorry," I finally stumble out. "I should go."

He doesn't answerrespond, so I move toward the stairs, but he keeps blocking them. And he keeps watching me, head tilted just a little, like he's trying to figure something out while I pray for the ground to open up and swallow me.

Now would be a perfect time for another one of those earthquakes, is all I'm saying.

When he finally speaks, his voice sounds a little rusty. "Why?"

"Why should I leave? Or why was I crying?"

“Neither.”

“I ... have no idea what I’m supposed to say to that.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“Look, I’m sorry I threatened to hit you in the art studio today. You’re just-...” I blow out a long breath. “A lot sometimes.”

He lifts a brow, but other than that, his blank expression doesn’t change. “So are you.”

“Yeah.” I let out a watery laugh, gesture to my still wet cheeks. “Yeah, I can see why you might think that.”

I’m only a few steps from him, but he closes the gap, moving in until he’s only inches away from me. My mouth goes desert dry.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn’t. I wait for him touch me, but he doesn’t do that either. Instead, he just stands here, so close that I can feel his breath on my cheek. So close that I’m sure he can feel my breath on his.

And still his eyes are dark, empty, blank.

More seconds that feel like minutes tick by until finally—finally—he whispers, “What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?” I’m baffled, and a little afraid that I’m setting myself up to be the punchline of some joke.

“What’s it like to feel like that?”

“Like what? Sad?” Embarrassment swamps me again and I wipe at my cheeks, trying to disappear even the remnants of my tears. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for anyone to see me. I—”

“Not just sad. Anything. What’s it like to feel so much? And to just be able to let it out like that?”

Commented [SA104]: This is great ☺

Commented [ep105]: I absolutely love this but up until this moment, Jax feels EVERYTHING. Heck, even a missed text and he’s tearing the school down. I really like the idea of him being cold at the beginning and her waking him up, but htat’s not what we have here. Lemme go back and twiddle... ☺

“I don’t—” “I pause, take a deep breath. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

For long seconds he doesn’t answer. Then he just kind of shakes his head and says, “Never mind.” He walks past me, opens the door to the room that lays just beyond the alcove and walks inside.

I stare after him, not sure what I’m supposed to do. It feels like our conversation is over, like he just dismissed me, but he left his door open in what looks like an invitation.

I stand there for another minute or so, undecided, before he finally sticks his head back out the door. “Coming?” he asks.

I follow him inside—of course I do—but I’m completely unprepared for what I find when I walk into the room, a room I can’t help thinking of as my own private wonderland.

Books are everywhere, stacked haphazardly on nearly every available surface.

There are three guitars in the corner, along with a drum kit that has my mouth watering and my fingers itching to touch it. To play it, like I used to play mine back when I still had one.

Back when I still had a lot of things.

In the center of the room is a giant black leather couch, covered with piles of thick, soft pillows that all but beg to be napped on.

~~And~~ I want to touch everything, want to run my hands over the drum kit just so I can feel its soul. I have just enough self-control left not to follow my impulses, but it’s hard. So hard that I can’t help but ~~to~~ tuck my hands in my blazer pockets, just to be on the safe side.

Because I’ve only just now realized that this is Jaxon’s dorm room, and to say it’s sit is unexpected would be is pretty much the understatement of the century.

Jaxon seems completely uninterested in his surroundings, which seems ~~bizarre~~~~insane~~ to me even though I know it's because ~~this is it's~~ his stuff. He sees and touches and uses it every day. But there's a part of me that still wants to know how he can just ignore the pile of art books by the couch or the giant purple crystal on his desk. It's the same part of me all but screaming that—no matter what Jaxon thinks—I'm nowhere near cool enough to be ~~in~~ here, with him.

Since he's not talking, I turn to look at the art on the wall, big, wild paintings with bold colors and strokes that excite all kinds of ideas inside of me. And hanging next to his desk—even more unbelievably—~~is~~ is a small pencil sketch of a woman with wild hair and sly eyes, dressed in a voluminous kimono.

I recognize it—or at least I think I do, so I walk closer, trying to get a better look. And sure enough—

“This is a Klimt!” I tell him.

“Yes,” he affirms.

“That wasn't a question.” It's under glass, so I reach out and tap the artist's signature in the bottom, right corner. “This is an original Klimt, not a reproduction.”

This time he doesn't say anything, not even yes. ~~He just stands there, rocked back on his heels with his hands in his pockets.~~

“So you're just going to stand there ~~with your hands in your pockets?~~” I demand. “You're not ~~going to say anything even going to answer me?~~”

“You just told me you weren't asking questions.”

“I'm not. But that doesn't mean I don't want to hear the story.”

He shrugs. “There's no story.”

“You have an original Klimt hanging next to your desk. Believe me, there’s a story there.” My hands are shaking as I trace the lines through the lines-glass once again. I’ve never been this close to one of his pieces before.

“I liked it. It reminded me of someone. I bought it.”

“That’s it? That’s your story?” I stare at him incredulously.

“I told you there wasn’t a story. You insisted there was.” He cocks his head to the side, watches me through narrowed eyes. “Did you want me to lie?”

“I want you to-...” I shake my head, blow out another long breath. “I don’t know what I want you to do.”

At that, he lets out a small laugh—the very first sign of emotion he’s shown since that one, frantic *are you okay* in the art room. “I know the feeling.”

He’s halfway across the room, and there’s a part of me that wishes he was closer. That wishes we were touching right now.

Of course, there’s another part of me that’s terrified of touching him, even more terrified of having him touch me. Being in his room is too much. Looking at his long, elegant hands as he spins a half dollar between his fingers in the first show of nervous energy I’ve ever seen from him is too much. around is too much.

Being touched by him, held by him, kissed by him, is so, so, so too much that I’m afraid I’ll implode at the first brush of his fingers against my skin.

AAfraid I’ll just spontaneously combust where I’m standing. No warning, no chance to stop it. Just a brush of his hand against mine and poof, I’m a goner. I swear it almost happened when he carried me back to my room last night and that was before he charmed me at breakfast. Way before I saw this place.

Commented [ep106]: When did he turn into a magician?
lol

I wonder if he's afraid of the same thing, because instead of answering, he turns around and enters what I assume is his bedroom. At least until he realizes I'm still staring at the Klimt—and every other fabulous thing in the room—to be following him.

He kind of rolls his eyes, but then he comes back and gently ~~guides-herds~~ me toward his bedroom—all without laying a finger on me.

“Come on. There's something I want you to see.”

I follow him blindly. With Flint earlier, I had moments of concern, of worry that it wasn't safe to be alone with him. Everything inside of me warns that Jaxon is a million times more dangerous than Flint and still I have not an ounce of trepidation when it comes to being alone in his bedroom with him. When it comes to being anywhere—or doing anything—with him.

I don't know if that makes me stupid or a good judge of character. Not that it really matters, because it is what it is.

Jax~~on~~ stops near the edge of his bed and picks up the heavy, red blanket folded across the edge of it. Then he reaches into his top dresser drawer and pulls out a pair of faux fur lined gloves and tosses them to me. “Put those on and come on.”

“Come on where?” I ask, baffled. But I do as he asks and slide my hands into the gloves.

He opens the window and frigid air rushes in.

“You can't be serious. No way am I going out there. I'll freeze.”

He looks over his shoulder at me; ~~and winks.~~ And then climbs out the window and drops three feet onto the parapet just below the tower.

Commented [ep107]: Flint wiggles his brows.

H should ignore him, should simply turn around and walk out of this room—out of this tower—and away from any boy who thinks I’m dumb enough to hang out on an Alaskan roof in November with nothing more than a hoodie to keep me warm. That’s what I *should* do.

Of course, just because I should do it, doesn’t mean I ~~will~~do.

Because, apparently, I’m a clown. And part of being a clown means doing exactly what I shouldn’t~~doing exactly what I shouldn’t drinking the dumb bitch juice~~—in this case, following Jaxon straight out the window and onto the parapet.

Commented [TD108]: Great description, but it doesn’t feel like Grace. Okay to keep as is?

Commented [ep109]: My daughter said this is what the teens would say instead of using moron haha. Feel free to reword. 😊

Chapter Thirty-One

Madonna’s Not the Only One with A Lucky Star

The second I drop down beside him, he wraps the blanket around me, head and all, so that only my eyes stick out. And I have to say, I’m not sure what the blanket is made of, but the moment it’s wrapped around me I stop shivering. I’m not exactly warm, but I’m definitely not going to be dying of hypothermia anytime soon either.

“What about you?” I ask, when I realize Jaxon is only wearing his hoodie. It’s a heavy hoodie, the same one he was wearing when I saw him outside yesterday with Lia, but still, nowhere near enough protection for the weather. “We can share the blanket.”—“

I break off when he laughs. “I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Of course I’m going to worry about you. The weather is frigid.”

He shrugs. “I’m used to it.”

“That’s it. I have to ask.”

Everything about him turns wary. “Ask what?”

“Are you an alien?”

Both his brows go up this time, all the way to his hairline. “Excuse me?”

“Are. You. An. Alien? I can’t believe it’s that shocking of a question. I mean, look at you.” I wave an arm up and down under the blanket, my way of encompassing everything that is Jaxon in one fell swoop.

“I can’t look at myself.” For the first time, he sounds amused.

“You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.” He leans down so there’s only a couple inches separating our faces.

“You’re going to have to explain it to me.”

“Like you don’t already know you’re pretty much the hottest person alive.”

He rears back like I’ve struck him, and I don’t think he even realizes that he touches his scar as he says, “Yeah, right.”

Which...come on. “You ~~don’t actually think that scar does anything but make you sexy as hell, do you?~~” have to know that scar makes you sexy as hell, right?”

Commented [ep110]: Ohh you know what, I don’t mind her calling him hot all the time if we learn he actually ISN’T hot, she just always saw him that way.

~~“No.” Short, simple answer~~ It’s a short answer. Simple. Succinct, even. And yet it reveals so much more than he’d ever want anyone to see. ~~–So succinct. And yet so revealing as well.~~

“Well, ~~it does. Sexy. As. Hell.~~” I repeat. – Plus, there’s the ~~whole everyone’s way everyone pretty much kisses your ass all the time.~~ – ~~deferent-to-you thing.~~”

“Not everyone.” He gives me a pointed look.

“*Almost* everyone. And you never get cold.”

“I get cold.” He burrows a hand inside the blanket, presses his fingers to my arm. And he’s right, he is cold. But he’s also nowhere close to being frostbitten, which is what I would be if I’d stood out here this long in just a hoodie.

I give him a look and try to pretend that, ~~despite the chill,~~ his hand on my arm doesn’t flood every cell of my body with heat. “You know what I mean.”

“So, let me get this straight. Because I: one, am the hottest person alive—~~“”~~” He smirks as he says it, “Two, make everyone ~~afraid-genuflect~~ and three, don’t get cold very often, you’ve decided I’m an alien.”

“Do you have a better explanation?”

He pauses, considers. “I do, actually.”

“And it is *what* exactly?”

“I could tell you ...”

“‘But then you’d have to kill me?’” I roll my eyes. “Seriously? We’ve reverted to tired old *Top Gun* lines?”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Oh, yeah?” It’s my turn to cock my head to the side. “~~So w~~What were you going to say~~?~~”

“I was going to say ‘You can’t handle the truth.’”

He totally deadpans it, but I burst out laughing anyway. Because, how can I not when he’s quoting *A Few Good Men* to me. “So you’re an old movie buff? Or just an old Tom Cruise movie buff?”

“Ugh.” He makes a face. “Definitely not the second. As for old movies, I’ve seen a few.”

“So if I mentioned starving women and making a dress out of their skin, you’d know I meant—”

“Buffalo Bill, from *Silence of the Lambs*? Yeah.”

I grin at him. “So maybe not an alien after all.”

“*Definitely* not an alien.”

Silence stretches between us for a while. It’s not awkward. In fact, it’s kind of nice to just be able to *be* for a little while. But eventually the cold works its way through his magic blanket. I pull it more closely around myself and ask, “So, are you going to tell me what we’re doing out here?”

He glances at his phone, then very deliberately looks up at the sky. “You’ll figure it out in about three minutes.”

“Is it the aurora borealis?” I ask, trepidation replaced instantly by excitement. “I’ve been dying to see them.”

“Sorry. You’ve got to be up in the middle of the night to get a look at the northern lights.”

“So then what—” I break off as what appears to be a giant fireball streaks its way across the sky. Seconds later, another one follows it.

“What’s going on?” I demand.

“A meteor shower. We don’t get many up here because they tend to take place in the summer, when we’ve got daylight most of the time and can’t see them. But when we do have one in the winter, it’s pretty spectacular.”

I gasp as another three meteors fly by, leaving long, glowing tails in their wake. “That’s an understatement. This is incredible.”

“I thought you might like it.”

“I do. I really do.” I glance at him, suddenly shy though I don’t know why. “Thank you.”

He doesn’t answer, but then I’m not expecting him to.

We stand out on the parapet for a good half an hour, not talking, not even looking at each other much, just watching the most insane meteor shower I’ve ever seen light up the sky. And I love every second of it.

It’s weird, but something about being out here, looking at the vast night sky overlooking the vast, snowy mountains ~~st-frozen-tundra~~... It puts things in perspective. Reminds me of how tiny I really am in the grand scheme of things, of how fleeting my problems—and my grief—are, no matter how painful and all-encompassing they feel right now.

Maybe that’s what Jaxon intended when he brought me out here.

When the shower ends, it comes with a burst of seven or eight comets in a row. I can’t help oohing and aahing as they burn their way across the sky. When it’s over, I expect to feel let down—like what happens at the end of a really good movie or fireworks show. That little pang of disappointment that something so wonderful is over forever.

But with the meteor shower, I feel—...—as close to peaceful as I have in a very long time.

“We should go in,” Jaxon says eventually. “It’s getting colder.”

“I’m okay. I just want another minute or two, if that’s all right ~~okay~~.”

He inclines his head in an of course kind of gesture.

There's so much I want to say to him, so many things he's done for me in the very short time we've known each other. But every time I try to come up with the words, they don't sound right in my head. So eventually, I settle for saying, "Thank you."

He laughs, but it's a sound completely devoid of humor. I don't understand why, until I look in his eyes and realize they are completely blank again. I don't like it, at all.

"Why do you laugh when I thank you?" I demand.

"Because you don't ever have to thank me, Grace."

"Why not? You did something really nice for me—"¹¹¹

"No, I didn't."

"Um, yeah you did."¹¹² Under the blanket, I hold my arms out in the universal gesture of what-about-all-this. "Why don't just admit it? Take the compliment and move on."

"Because I don't deserve the compliment." The words seems to burst straight out of him without his permission, and now that they're hanging there, he looks a little sick. "I'm just doing my ..."

"Your what? Your job?" I ask, my stomach clenching at the thought. "Did my uncle ask you to be nice to me or something?"

He laughs, but there's no amusement in the sound. No joy. Just a soul-deep cynicism that has my eyes watering all over again, but for very different reasons. "I'm the last person Finn would ever ask to be friends with you."

Commented [ep111]: Should we say in here that this is his job. Doesn't she get he's responsible for keeping her safe or something? Not sure how much it's mentioned earlier, since edits, so may or may not need that here.

If I was more polite, and less concerned about him, I'd be inclined to drop the subject entirely. But politeness has never been one of my virtues—I've got too much curiosity for that—so, instead, I call him on his shit. ~~“What exactly does that mean?”~~ “And why is that exactly?”

“It means I'm not a nice person. I don't do *nice* things. Ever. So it's ridiculous to compliment me on your perception of what I do.”

“Really?” I shoot him a skeptical look. “Because I hate to be the one to break it to you, but cheering a sad girl up is a *nice* thing to do. So is carrying her back to her dorm when she hurts her ankle and chasing off guys who think pranks that can kill people are funny. All nice things, Jaxon.”

For the first time, he looks uncomfortable, but he still won't back down. ~~“I didn't do it for you.”~~

“Oh, yeah? Then who did you do it for?”

He doesn't have an answer. Of course he doesn't.

“That's what I thought.” I grin up at him, all cocky and obnoxious because, on this, I can be. “Looks to me like you're just going to have to accept the fact that you did something sweet. You won't burn at the stake, I promise.”

“They only burn witches.”

He sounds so serious that I can't stop myself from laughing. “Well, I'm pretty sure we're safe then.”

“Don't be too sure about that.”

I start to ask him what he means, but a violent shiver wracks me at the same time—blanket or no blanket, it's freaking cold out here—and Jaxon takes the decision into his own hands. “Come on. Time to get you inside.”

Hard to argue when my teeth are about a minute away from chattering. But when I glance up at the window we came out of, I can't help wondering, "How exactly are we going to get back in? And by we, I mean me." Dropping three feet out of a window is one thing. Boosting myself back up is another thing entirely.

But Jaxon just shakes his head. "Don't worry. I've got you, Grace."

Before I can figure out why those words sizzle through me like a lightning bolt, he's grabbing onto the windowsill and swinging himself inside. The whole move takes about one point four seconds and I have to admit, I'm impressed. Then again, nearly everything Jaxon does impresses me, whether he means it to or not. *He* impresses me. More, he makes me feel not so alone at a time when I've never been lonelier.

He's back in moments, poking his head and upper body out of the window. "Give me your hands."

I lift my arms up without a second thought and he grabs onto my forearms, right below the elbow, and pulls. Seconds later, I'm back through the window and standing an inch—maybe two—from Jaxon.

And for once his eyes aren't dead. They're on fire. And they're focused [dD](#)irectly. On. Me.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Is That A Wooden Stake in Your Pocket or Are You Just Happy To See Me?

I stare back at him, not sure what to expect...or what to do. There's a part of me that thinks he's going to back up and a part of me that really hopes he doesn't. A part of me that wonders what it would feel like to kiss him and a part of me that thinks I should run for the hills, because Jaxon might not be an alien, but he's not like any boy I've ever met either. And I am more than honest enough to admit that much as I may want him, there's no way I can actually handle him.

In the end, he doesn't kiss me. But he doesn't back up, either. And neither do I. So we stand there for I don't know how long, him looking down, me looking up, the air between us loaded, heavy, electric.

I'm in it now, captivated by everything Jaxon is and everything he isn't despite my misgivings~~fears~~. I wait for him to make a move, but he doesn't. He just keeps looking at me with those midnight eyes of his, emotion he rarely shows seething right below the surface. It makes me ache for him. Makes me physically hurt as I remember the question he asked earlier, the one that started all of this.

I finally have the words—or in this case, the word—to answer him. “Overwhelming,” I say just as he starts to slide the blanket from my shoulders.

He freezes, the blanket—and his hands—hovering somewhere around the middle of my back. “What are you talking about?”

“You asked me what it was like to feel as much as I do. It’s overwhelming. But what you just did for me—...it makes everything a little more bearable. So thank you. Seriously.”

“Grace—...”

I take one step closer, until my breasts are just brushing against his chest. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’ve never made a move on a guy in my life and Jaxon isn’t just any guy. I’m flying blind, but that doesn’t matter now. Nothing does, except touching him somehow. I want him to feel the soft-strength of my arms around him, the softness of ~~and~~ my body against his. And I wWant to feel the warm power of him against my own.

Except he’s not warm at all, that hoodie of his obviously no defense against the weather, despite what he said.

“Jaxon, you’re freezing!” I pull the blanket from his hands and throw it around his shoulders before wrapping it all the way around him. Then I rub my hands up and down his blanket-covered arms, trying to chafe some warmth back into him.

“I’m fine,” he says, trying to ~~backpull~~ away.

“You’re obviously not fine. I’ve never felt anyone as cold as you are right now.”

“I’m fine[!]” he ~~barks-insists~~ again, and this time he does take a step back. Several steps in fact.

Everything inside me ~~stopsfreezes~~. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to invade your personal space...---” I break off, because I don’t know what else to say. I don’t know what I’ve done that is so wrong.

“Grace...” His voice trails off, too. And in that moment, he looks different than all the other times. He isn’t confident, isn’t amused, isn’t even stoically silent as he was when I was yelling at him in the art studio.

No, right now he just looks---vulnerable.

There’s a desire in his eyes, a craving that has nothing to do with wanting me and everything to do with needing me. Needing my comfort. Needing my touch.

I can no more deny him than I can jump off this tower and fly under my own power. So I follow his retreat, taking the steps that bring my body back into contact with the hardness of his. Then I cup his face in my hands, stroke my thumbs over his insane cheekbones and my fingers over the jagged edges of his scar.

His breath catches—I hear it in his chest, feel it against me. And though my heart is beating faster than a triple time ~~metronome on high~~, I don’t back away. I can’t. I’m dazzled, mesmerized, enthralled.

Commented [ep112]: Already used this expression

All I can think about is him.

All I can see is him.

All I can smell and hear and taste is him. And nothing has ever felt so right.

“Can I ask you a question?” I move even closer to him, unable to stop myself. *Unwilling* to stop myself.

“Of course.” For a second I think he’s going to take a step back, but he doesn’t. Instead, he opens up the blanket and wraps it around me too, so that his arms are around my waist and we’re both sheltered within it.

“Who did that Klimt sketch remind you of ~~w~~When you bought it?”

“You.” The answer comes fast and honest. “I just didn’t know it yet.”

And just like that, I melt. Then I do the only thing I can do. The only thing I want to do. I push up on my tiptoes and I kiss him.

It’s not a passionate kiss, not a hard kiss, definitely not a wild kiss. It’s just the brush of my lips against his, as soft as a snowflake, as delicate as the permafrost that stretches in all directions.

But for me, at least, it’s just as powerful. Maybe more.

Jaxon doesn’t respond for one second, two, and I ~~start to~~ pull away, convinced I’ve made a terrible mistake. An idea that is only reinforced by his tight jaw and the strained words he grinds out. “We shouldn’t be doing this,” he tells me. “It’s a bad idea.”

But his body is still flush against mine and his hands are still on my upper arms. But then his hands are on my upper arms, holding me in place. “It doesn’t feel like a bad idea,” I tell him,

“No,” he agrees. “It doesn’t. And then he’s pulling me against him, squeezing me tightly as his mouth goes crazy on mine. His fingers squeezing tightly, pulling me against him as his mouth goes crazy on mine.”

Lips, tongue, teeth, it’s a cacophony of sensations—a riot of pleasure, desperation, need all wrapped into one~~pleasure~~need—as he takes me. As he takes and takes and takes... and gives back even more.

Commented [ep113]: He should be warning her how this is not a good idea, for either of them, etc.

It's a good thing he's holding on to me because my head spins and my knees go weak at the first swipe of his tongue along mine—just like one of those heroines from a novel. I've been kissed before. ~~I've even had one semi-serious boyfriend.~~ But no kiss ~~they gave me~~ ever made me feel like this. felt anything like this.

~~I~~I strain against him, try to slide my arms up around his neck, but his hands are vices on my biceps, holding me in place. Holding me still, so that all I can do is take what he gives me.

And he gives a lot, head tilting, mouth moving on mine. My head gets lighter, my knees get weaker, and I swear I feel the ground trembling beneath my feet. And still the kiss goes on.

The trembling gets worse and it hits me a second before my knees buckle. It's not just our kiss. The earth is actually shaking, again.

"Earthquake!" I manage to squeak out, wrenching my mouth~~lips~~ from his.

Jaxon doesn't listen at first, just follows my lips with his like he wants to keep on kissing me forever. And I almost let it go, almost melt back into him—I'm a California girl, after all. ~~If~~ it was a bad one, things would already be falling off the walls.

But it must hit Jaxon at the same time I'm about to forget about it, because not only does he let me go, but he's halfway across the room between one breath and the next. [“]

I watch as he clenches his fists by his side, as he takes a long, slow, deep breath...and then another and another as the earth continues to shake.

"It's okay," I tell him. "It's just a small quake, nowhere near as bad as the one this morning. It'll be over in a second."

"You have to go."

“What?” I couldn’t have heard him right. He couldn’t have been kissing me like he wants to devour me a few seconds ago and now he demanding that I leave in a voice as cold as the air outside. “It’s fine—”

“It’s not fine,” he snaps out, and it’s the only sign of emotion from him now that his face and eyes are blank again. “You. Need. To. Go!”

“Jaxon—” “I can’t stop myself from reaching for him. “Please—”

All of a sudden, his bedroom window shatters, glass flying in all directions. It sounds like an explosion and I let out a strangled scream as shards of glass hit me above my eyebrow and on my neck, my cheek, my shoulder.

“Go!” Jaxon shouts and this time there’s no defying him. Not when he looks and sounds so out of control, terrifying.

Commented [TD114]: i

He advances on me then, fingers flexing and eyes burning like black coals in a face livid with rage.

I turn and run as fast as my weak knees will carry me, determined to ~~get~~make it to the staircase, to freedom, before this strange, monstrous version of Jaxon overtakes me.

I don’t make it.

